

THE REFORMATION AND THE RELIGION

OF THE SPIRIT.

A CRITICAL STUDY of the LIFE and

TEACHING of HANS DENCK,

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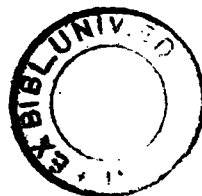
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# THE REFORMATION AND THE RELIGION OF THE SPIRIT.

## A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE LIFE AND TEACHING OF HANS DENCK.

### INTRODUCTION.

#### ANABAPTISM and the RELIGION of the SPIRIT.

Hans Denck, an independent and influential thinker among the Reformers of the 16th Century, was a forceful and original exponent of the Religion of the Spirit. Only a fragment of his brief life - the last three years - became of historical interest, and, except within a limited circle, his name is almost unknown, so great is the obscurity that has fallen on one who in his day was the leader of a great religious party<sup>(1)</sup>, equally opposed to the old Catholicism and the new Protestantism, whose words and writings were the inspiration of thousands in whom he had awakened the spirit of brotherly love and unselfishness, and a multitude of whom bravely faced martyrdom and death for their faith. Apart from his own writings, what we know of Denck comes for the most part from his theological opponents, confessedly unsympathetic critics of the movement he led, and the Spiritual

(1) Especially in Southern and Western Germany he had an immense following which rivalled that of Luther himself. See Keller Ein Apostel 1c p. iii.

Reform he advocated, and for the advancement of which he carried on so strenuous a propaganda. It is all the more noteworthy that the practically unanimous testimony about him is that, wherever he went in his wanderings, he made a profound impression by his personality and teaching. He is described as a tall young man of distinguished and imposing appearance, and a manner marked by deliberateness and reserve. Sebastian Franck, who is a friendly witness, speaks of him as "a quiet, pious, retiring man."<sup>(2)</sup> But his lofty character, his spirituality of mind, his masterly gifts, his classical learning, his eloquence, his personal fascination, his marvellous influence and powers of leadership, are generally recognised by all. Denck was evidently<sup>6</sup> of a very friendly disposition, but at the same time absolutely sincere, a bold and intrepid fighter for his ideals, and utterly fearless in his energetic and untiring advocacy of what he believed to be the truth.<sup>7</sup> Though theological conflict and social disturbance attended him everywhere, his passionate enthusiasm for the religious interests which dominated him kindled in his followers a faith and devotion, which expressed themselves in such calm heroism and strength as was

(2) Chronica Zeytbuch und Geschichtsbibel III. 135  
Seb. Franck.

displayed by one whose praise is sung in a Revival hymn of the period.<sup>(3)</sup> "The Judge furious with him menaced him with the flames. 'In the strength of the flames,' said he, 'you will discover mine.'"

Such, however, was the success of the forces marshalled against him, that the very memory of Denck was almost completely obliterated, and only within the last seventy or eighty years has any serious attempt been made to disentangle the true facts of his history, and to give him his place in the Reform movement of the 16th Century. For more than three hundred years 'Anabaptism', the 'great and chaotic movement that ran side by side with the more rigidly organised Reformation,'<sup>(4)</sup> stood as the synonym for religious fanaticism, and social and political lawlessness. The shadow of the Kingdom of Münster lay heavy upon it. Although its excesses are probably to be regarded as 'more of an accident than of the

(3) A hymnbook, containing hymns written by Hans Hut, Ludwig Hetzer, Jacob Dachser, and Langemantel, did much to disseminate the teaching of the new Movement. Hymns played a great part in the religious worship and propaganda of the Spiritual Reform Party. Their themes were the following of Christ through Cross and suffering, obedience to the law of God, and the practice of brotherly love. In the Archives of Augsburg is a torn little hymnbook of this kind. Keller Ein Apostel &c. p.109.

(4) Mystical Religion. Rufus Jones, p.370.

essence of the movement', it was with 'Anabaptism' as with the Montanism of the second century, its extravagances in the end destroyed its usefulness and promise. The world knew and remembered the spiritual anarchy and excesses of the extremists, who in no real sense represented the soul of the movement, and misunderstood and forgot the spiritual exaltation of a great multitude of men, who, regardless of the cost of fidelity to their convictions, met suffering and death with dauntless courage and sublime heroism. The overthrow of Denck and his (moderate) party goes to the credit of the Civil Power, and is an example of successful persecution.

"Later, the Münster Rising overwhelmed in disgrace all who were unfortunate enough to be designated with the opprobrious name of 'Anabaptist'. And at the same time it awakened a real fear of everything that threatened law and order, and all new movements, (apart from Lutheranism which had established itself in Germany, and Zwinglianism which had done the same in Switzerland), were regarded with suspicion as the possible precursors of revolt." They were accordingly banned and ruthlessly suppressed by the Civil Power<sup>(5)</sup>.

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(5) 'Anabaptism' had two distinct stages under different leaders:-  
(a)/

The Spiritual Reform at the outset was not a sect or a homogeneous party, but a tendency. It had no definite creed, for its primary doctrine of the Inner Word, and its belief in a continuous and progressive Revelation, left no room for the rigid theological systems with which the 16th Century Church of the Reformation seemed resolved to replace the scholastic theology of the Medieval Church. The Spiritual Reformers considered the orthodox Reform to be even more unyielding, in its adherence to the new Orthodoxy, than the Medieval Church had been, in its adherence to the old. They pleaded for freedom, and the guidance of the Spirit which has always been and always will be in men. The result was that the Spiritual Reform was distinguished by the greatest tolerance in matters of belief. "What characterised them all (the independent Reformers) was that they had little sense of historical continuity, cared nothing for it, and so broke with the past completely: that they despaired of seeing any good in the

(a) 1525-30. It was during this time that Hans Denck held so commanding and distinguished a position in the movement.

(b) 1530-36. Anabaptism then entered on the troubled years in which Jan of Leyden appears as the most sinister figure.

Out of the chaos after Münster emerged the reconstructed movement under Menno Simons, and now represented by the Baptist Communities of Holland and other lands. Keller Ein Apostel v. p. 5, 9.

historical Church, and believed that it must be ended as it was impossible to mend it: and that they all possessed a strong sense of individuality, believing the human soul to be imprisoned when it accepted the confinement of a common creed, institution, or form of service unless of the very simplest kind."<sup>(6)</sup>

Their antagonism to dogma was also characteristic of the Humanists. Erasmus, who was always protesting against dogmatic subtleties, wrote in 1521: "It would be better for us if we thought less about dogma and more about the Gospel."<sup>(7)</sup> The orthodox Reformation with its new Church and its new creed had been a failure in the sphere of practical morals. Things were no better, if in some ways they were not worse, than before Luther flung out his challenge to the Pope and the ancient Church. The problems of practical reform in life and manners - individual and social - remained unsolved. The men of the Spiritual Reform believed that they had found the better way, and in their demands for a purely spiritual form of the Christian religion,<sup>(8)</sup> they entered

(6) History of the Reformation. T. M. Lindsay, II. p.422.

(7) Ep.DLXXXVII.

(8) It was in the interest of a Spiritual Christianity that they all agreed in their rejection of Infant Baptism.



into conflict with the Party which aimed, in alliance with the Civil Power, at the establishment of a State Church that would be a bulwark against the counter-attacks and reactionary influence of a rejuvenated Papacy, and which would be able to safeguard the results of the liberty claimed, and so far won, by the successful revolt against the spiritual tyranny and anarchy of the Medieval Church.

In the Spiritual Reform which was generally described by the contemptuous and opprobrious epithet of 'Anabaptism', there was no uniformity of method, in the way by which it sought to attain its ideals, any more than there was uniformity in the beliefs, which were the formative influence in the creation of these ideals. "Anabaptism, historically, represents a movement which aimed at social and political as well as religious reform; and the wider social and political aspect blended more or less with the religious aspect of the Movement." Some of the methods advocated were radical and even revolutionary. But there were other methods advocated and consistently followed which, while quite as radical, were distinguished by intense spirituality. It is therefore necessary in trying to estimate this general movement of Reform known as 'Anabaptism', to

distinguish a Right and a Left Wing of the Party,<sup>(9)</sup> which strove for the same ends, were influenced by the same ideals, but which endeavoured to achieve their purpose in different ways. The Left Wing became convinced of the justifiableness of Revolutionary action in the cause of Reform, and developed into an extreme and aggressive Anabaptism in which adult baptism was made the badge of social and political revolt. In its conflict with the massed resources of Catholicism and Protestantism it found its Philippi at Münster (A.D. 1536). The Right Wing of the Party, however, totally abjured the Civil Sword in the defence or propagation of Spiritual Religion, remained loyal to its convictions and suffered unflinchingly for its loftier ideals of a Church both pure and free; and of a Christian life distinguished by its fidelity to the voice of the Spirit within.<sup>(10)</sup>

(9) Luther called them all "lying spirits". Thomas Münzer, A. Carlstadt, M. Cellarius, Hans Denck, Menno Simons and Jan of Leyden were all classed together with Zwingli, Oecolampadius and others as "Enthusiasts". Luther says quite explicitly that the Anabaptists and the Enthusiasts are "children of one spirit". 'Es ist die Wahrheit dass Wiedertäufer und Schwärmergeist ein Geist ist.' (Justus Mennius Vom dem Geist der Wiedertäufer. Wittenberg, 1544. Preface.) Wiedertäufer - Anabaptist - in Reformation times was a general term, the equivalent of our 'Separatist', 'Sectarian', 'Nonconformist'. Schwärmergeist simply meant 'Fanatic'. Keller Ein Apostel 2. B. 4.5.

(10) Sebastian Franck and Gaspar von Schwenkfeld were later representatives of this side of the movement.

To this Right Wing, which was characterised by a Mystical tendency and insisted on a continuous Divine revelation, Hans Denck belonged. For more than a year he was without doubt an 'Anabaptist', in the strict sense of the word, - a member and leader of "The Apostolical Brethren", - but an 'Anabaptist' of the most spiritual type, and antagonistic to all violent and revolutionary methods. That he believed he could mould the spiritual forces of 'Anabaptism' for purely spiritual ends accounts for his presence in its ranks. Anabaptism seemed to him the most promising instrument for the accomplishment of a true spiritual Reformation. Its freedom from fixed creeds, its ideal of the spirituality of the Church and its independence of the State, the extreme simplicity of its organisation, that of a Brotherhood, above all its vivid sense of the immanence of the Spirit of God who in some real way is incarnate in every man, strongly appealed to him. He accepted its rite of adult baptism, but not from any belief in the spiritual efficacy of baptism - either infant or adult. It was nothing more to him than a symbol of spiritual union. For Denck Baptism was one of the indifferent things of the Christian religion. Rites and ceremonies contained nothing

of real spiritual value, and in accepting the second - adult - baptism which he did at Augsburg in 1526, through the urgent persuasion of Doctor Balthasar Hübmaier, he probably felt himself justified, in what might seem a denial of the spiritual principle, by his view of the rite as a mere symbol of membership in a spiritual Communion - the invisible Communion of the Saints - to which he already belonged. The use or the non-use of baptism had for Denck no religious significance. Baptism gave him nothing he did not have before. The rite of adult baptism only opened to him the door into what seemed a sphere of unlimited usefulness, by giving an unmistakable pledge, to devoted and spiritually minded fellow-workers, of his sympathy with their ideals and aims. And, doubtless, the acceptance of the rite of adult baptism gave him a leverage in the wide spread movement for Spiritual Reform that otherwise he could not have obtained. "Urbanus Rhegius speaks of him as the "Abbot" of "The Brethren" and Berthold Haller in a letter to Zwingli, 2nd December, 1527, says "Denck, 'the Anabaptist Apollo', is at Basel." P. Gyronaeus in 1526 refers to Denck as the 'High Priest of the Anabaptists', while Johannes Bader, the pastor of Landau, in 1527 writes of "the famous

Hans Denck<sup>\*</sup> with whom he dared not venture to compare himself.<sup>\*</sup>

The message which Denck delivered to his generation continued, even when he was forgotten, to permeate the thoughts and teachings of many who had never heard his name. For the soul of the Spiritual Reform could not perish and lived on. By many devious paths it found its way into the life and faith of men, and now after nearly four hundred years, by the remarkable triumph of his ideas and principles, Denck, (and his fellow-labourers in the Spiritual Reform), is having the revenge of justification<sup>1</sup> for the stern repression he encountered in his life-time, and for the ignominious oblivion in which it was believed death and the destruction of his work had finally buried him.

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<sup>\*</sup> Keller Ein Apostel 2 p.7

DENCK and the LUTHERANS of NÜRNBERG.

Hans Denck, Scholar, Reformer and Evangelist, was a native of Bavaria<sup>(11)</sup>, where he was born about 1495; and he was educated and took his degree at the University of Ingolstadt<sup>(12)</sup> in that kingdom. For some years there is no record of his career, with the exception of a passing glimpse of him as a member of the Humanist Circle at Augsburg<sup>(13)</sup>, in his twenty-fifth year (A.D. 1520). Two years later he is at Basel, where he is recognised as the most accurate Greek scholar in the Erasmus circle<sup>(14)</sup> and is employed as proof-reader to the famous printing firm of Valentin Curio, and with his brilliant scholarship and proficiency in Hebrew and the Classics, it was probably in this way he was often able to support himself in his three years' wanderings from city to city. It is evident that Pirkheimer, the distinguished Humanist scholar who resided at Nürnberg, was interested in him, and it was at Pirkheimer's request that the Reformer Oecolampadius,

(11) Sabbata. Kessler (1902), p.150.

(12) L. Keller, Johann von Staupitz, p.207.

(13) L. Keller, Johann von Staupitz, p.208.

(14) Ep. Occol. an Pirkheimer, 25 April, 1525.  
Herzog Leben Oecolomp. II. 273.

whose Lectures on Isaiah Denck had attended at Basel in the summer semester of 1523, and whose friendship he had gained, <sup>(15)</sup> recommended him for the head-mastership of St. Sebald's school at Nürnberg.

Denck was elected to the vacant post which, it is said, had already been offered to and accepted by Melancthon, but who for some reason or other did not take up the appointment. It must be regarded as no insignificant honour for Denck, that, when only twenty-eight years of age, he should have been chosen to fill a position, which had been considered worthy of so distinguished and scholarly a man as that well-known coadjutor of Luther in the work of the Reformation.

That Denck the young Humanist was interested in religious problems, while yet at Basel, is evident from his relations with Oecolampadius, though it may be that the bond of sympathy between them was mainly scholarly, as they were both Humanists. Indeed Oecolampadius afterwards in a letter to Pirkheimer <sup>(16)</sup>, who had reported very unfavourably on

(15) Herzog II. 272. Denck in his last letter to Oecolampadius (1527) refers to their friendship at Basel, 'Dum hic apud Curionem agerem.'

(16) B11. Pirkheimeri opp. fol. 306 (V. Herzog II. 273), 25th April, 1525. Das Leben Joh. Oecolampadius, Basel 1843.

Denck's case<sup>(17)</sup>, expressly states that religious questions were rarely discussed by them. But Pirkheimer evidently believes that the religious interest in Denck was active at Basel, for, in this correspondence with Oecolampadius after Denck's banishment from Nürnberg, he suggests that his views on the Eucharist, which had brought him into conflict with the Lutherans of Nürnberg, had their origin in his mind at Basel. Oecolampadius thought it necessary to defend himself from complicity in teaching, which had proved so disastrous for Denck, by asserting that he had always been particularly careful, both in his lectures and writings, in dealing with such religious questions.†

There is no direct evidence that Denck was a student of the Mystical writers of the 14th and 15th Centuries, whose influence on the popular mind was so profound and far-reaching, and whose ideals were expressed in many communities, which sought to realise a spiritual conception of the Christian faith. But the mysticism of Tauler, the *Theologia Germanica*, and the 'Imitatio' was taught in Freiburg and other

(17) Oecolampadius, however, refuses to credit the sinister accusations made against Denck. 'Fert fama mira quaedam de Denckio. Certe non est mihi credibile, illum talem visum esse.' Oec. to Pirk., 26 Feb., 1525.

† Heubel *Stud. u. Krit.*, 1851.



German Universities with approval<sup>(18)</sup>, and, in the early years of the 16th Century, various editions of the works of Tauler (Ob.1361) were published at Freiburg, Leipzig, Augsburg and Basel.<sup>(19)</sup> Denck's mind, however, was still in the formative stage when he came to Nürnberg, and he proved extraordinarily receptive of new ideas. At Nürnberg he made the acquaintance of Thomas Münzer, who, with his restless and eager spirit, was a prominent leader in the movement for Spiritual Reform. Münzer was a devoted reader of the writings of the Dominican Mystic Tauler, whose teaching he had assimilated and which he disseminated with much enthusiasm. He always carried about with him the Augsburg (1508) edition of Tauler's Sermons. Münzer had many extravagances, but he had a powerful intellect, a profound conviction, and a forcefulness of character which made him a dominant personality wherever he went.<sup>(20)</sup>

(18) Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie, 1856, p.218.

(19) Graesse 'Trésor des livres rares et précieux'.

(20) In a letter of Luther to the Christians of Antwerp 1525 (Werke II. 61) we have the following reference to Münzer, who had formerly been Lutheran pastor of Alstadt in Thuringia:  
 "There has come among you one of those spirits of disorder which have assumed the human form. He seeks to lead you astray by the inventions of his sinful pride: beware of him. First, he says that every man has the Holy Spirit within him, for, that,  
 Secondly/

Hans Denck was deeply impressed with the idea of the Inner Word as expounded by Münzer. But this mystical teaching which he absorbed, and which came to him as a revelation, received the peculiar impress of his own mind. He unhesitatingly followed the guidance of the inner word to the ever-widening discovery of the Eternal Religion. In it he found the key to the spiritual interpretation of the Christian Faith, and from it sprang the impulse to attempt the organisation of Society in accordance with the mind of Christ, through the Ministry of the Invisible Church of all the faithful.

For eighteen months Denck remained at Nürnberg, the intellectual centre for a wide district, and then the storm burst. The City Council was very tolerant of the various forms of religious belief

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Secondly, the Holy Spirit is nothing else but our reason: Thirdly, he affirms that every man has faith: Fourthly, that there is no such place as Hell, or at all events that the flesh alone will be damned: Fifthly, that every soul will enjoy eternal life: Sixthly, that natural instinct, of itself, teaches us to do to our neighbour what we desire he should do to us. This, according to him, is Faith. Seventhly, that the law is not violated by Concupiscence, if only the mind does not consent: Eighthly, that he who is without the Holy Spirit is also without sin, for he is without reason. All these are audacious and monstrous propositions, the vain outcome of a diseased imagination."

and teaching which found a home there, and relying on that tolerance Denck may have been more outspoken in his utterances than prudence would have dictated. The Lutheran cause in Nürnberg since 1522 had been represented by Osiander<sup>(21)</sup>, a very talented young preacher, but also a very violent and narrow minded dogmatist, who, not without reason, from his point of view, took alarm at the new and strange views that were being advanced by the brilliant young schoolmaster of St. Sebald's. For, Denck was a religious genius, a man of great personal charm, a zealous propagandist, and ready to brave all danger in his passion for Spiritual Reform. He challenged the Lutheran teaching on the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper<sup>(22)</sup>, and there was no question on which the Lutherans were more sensitive than that. To the end Zwinglianism was anathema to Luther, and not even to save the Reformation itself would he have surrendered his position or compromised with Zwingli. This alone, then, would have been sufficient to make Denck suspect to Osiander, the leading Lutheran

(21) A. Osiander's Lehre in ihrer frühesten Gestalt. Stud. u. Krit., 1844.

(22) "I was a schoolmaster in Nürnberg about a year and a half, and in the end I disagreed with Osiander, a preacher there, on account of a few words about the Sacrament." (Schreiben an der Magistrat zu Augsburg, 1526.)

divine at Nürnberg. But there were other and even graver matters in dispute. Already Denck was convinced of the 'artificial' character of the Lutheran theology, and as an Apostle of Reality as became a Humanist, he found what he believed to be a vulnerable point for attack in the Satisfaction theory of the Sufferings and Death of Christ, a theory which he thought was largely responsible for the moral disorders of the time. For Denck the dogma lacked the element of ethical power, the absence of which was to his mind a conclusive argument against it. Whatever might be the explanation of the Sufferings and Death of Christ, for him it must be an explanation which was in the interests of the religious life. It is not difficult to understand how, to Denck's way of thinking, the Forensic scheme of Justification and Salvation, as expounded by Luther and his colleagues in the Reformation theology, seemed ethically defective, especially in view of the moral corruption that everywhere prevailed. (23) It seems

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(23) Hans Sachs, in the year 1524, Orig. Ausgabe in der Bibl. Paulina zu Münster, says addressing the Lutherans: 'There is much cry and little wool about you. If you have no use for brotherly love, you are no disciples of Christ. If you were really evangelical as you profess to be, you would do the works of the Evangel, and you would lead a godly life/

indisputable that a crude evangelicalism led to very grave moral laxity, and to Denck with his eminently practical conception of religion, it was evident that the Lutheran Church in Nürnberg failed to satisfy his ideas as to what a Christian community should be.

He was driven to look for an explanation of the failure, and he found it in the teaching of Luther regarding the absolute uselessness of good works for salvation.

It was a venturesome thing for Denck to measure his strength against the all-powerful Osiander, who had already (in 1524) succeeded in inducing the Council of Nürnberg to use the Civil Sword against separatists from the Lutheran Church. Denck could not but realise the danger of opposing so violent and imperious a man, but he engaged in the conflict with the most dauntless courage. †

Osiander in his Statement to the Council denounced Denck's view of the Inner Word as opening the door for the entrance of ancient errors. After an ineffective disputation with the preachers, it

life like the Apostles. The truth must always be persecuted by the ungodly.'

Three years after Denck's death - in 1530 - the minister of St. Sebald's Church, Nürnberg, declared that from the ethical standpoint there was no improvement in his congregation. It was only distinguished "by a carnal freedom". See Uhlhorn

Urbanus Rhegius, p.127. Keller Ein Apostel re  
bp. 33, 34.

† Stud. u. Krit. 1851 p. 128.

was resolved that Denck should hand in a written Confession, to the Nürnberg Council, dealing with the seven articles in question, viz., Scripture, Sin, the Righteousness of God, the Law, the Gospel, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Osiander declared himself ready to give a written answer to Denck. In the beginning of January 1525 Denck presented his Confession to the Council, <sup>(24)</sup> and it was immediately sent to the preachers. The preachers' reply came on January 11th. They declared themselves dissatisfied with Denck's answer, and said they did not think that further discussion would accomplish anything. They preferred therefore to reply to the Council and not to Denck. A reply to his Confession would only lead to further controversy and waste of time. If the Magistrates, however, thought that they should continue to deal with Denck, they were ready to do so. But it was the judgment of the Council that was really called for.

Denck was summoned to appear before the preachers, in presence of representatives from the Council. His explanations, however, were regarded as unsatisfactory. His appearance before the Council was described as "ungeschicht und verechtlích",

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(24) Denck's Erstes Glaubensbekenntniss. Keller ein Apostel, pp. 46-62.

and, in view of his determined attitude, it was evidently useless trying any more kindly measures with him. He was therefore banished, and forbidden "for ever" to return, within ten miles of Nürnberg, on pain of death. (25) The reasons given for the sentence were that Denck had introduced, propagated and dared to maintain certain unchristian errors, that he refused to listen to instruction, and that his answer regarding the articles laid before him was so discursive and wide of the mark it could easily be seen that further discussion would lead to nothing.

A significant commentary on the sentence imposed on Denck is found in a letter written by Luther Feb. 4, 1525, to Johann Brissmann, and which no doubt summarises the supposed teaching of Denck, as it had been reported to Luther by Osiander. "The devil has carried it so far that in Nürnberg some people are denying that Christ is anything, that the Word of God is anything, that the Eucharist is anything, that the Magistracy is anything. They say that only God is." \*

(25) Decret des Nürnberger Magistrats gegen Johann Denck, 1525, Januar 21. Rathsbuch Kr.12, Fol.282 (Hagen Geist der Reformation II. 108).

\* Keller Ein Apostel 2e p. 43

Denck's first Confession of Faith is of peculiar interest, for it contains the germs of all his later teaching. (26)

He begins with an enquiry into the reason and ground of faith. 'Who gives me faith?' he asks. 'Is it innate or can it be got from books or hearsay?' Or if not, on what other foundations must faith be built? Man considered in himself is a poor creature, and inclined to evil, but there is a something in him that strongly resists his inborn inclinations, and at the same time awakens a longing for a purer and better life - in other words, for Salvation. We are saved by faith, but what is faith? What we have been taught, and have learned from books and from our parents, is unable to conquer the evil inclinations within us. Mere traditional belief cannot bring us the salvation for which we long. And the more confidence we put in such belief, the worse we become.

Still, we are saved by faith, rightly understood. "To believe," says Denck, "is obedience to God and trust in His promises through Jesus Christ." (Cap. III.) "To believe," he says elsewhere, "is to obey the word

(26) The original document is in the Archives at Nürnberg.



of God, whether for life or for death, with an assured confidence that all is well."<sup>(27)</sup>

Faith is submission of the soul to the Divine Will, so as to attain to union with Him. "Unbelief is resistance to God, discord with God, separation from the good. A believer is one who lives for the good: an unbeliever is one who is a self-seeker."

Sin and unbelief consist in selfishness. Self-conquest leads us to faith. If it is objected that this is beyond human power, and that for this a man is not responsible, Denck replies that while it is true that the struggle must go on to the end, it is also true that Christ's power will not end with this life, and it is what is begun here that is continued hereafter through Christ the Mediator.

He holds the Scriptures in the highest honour, valuing them "above all human treasures", but how do we know that the Scriptures are what they profess to be? "If you regard the Scripture as authoritative, it is because you have assumed beforehand that the Scripture is the word of God, and so your assumption is taken as a proof of your contention." Faith, therefore, must be built on other foundations, particularly on immediate facts of experience.

(27) Ordnung Gottes, C.II.

One such fact according to Denck, is the inner feeling which tells every man that he should do what is good, and which "urges him on without his will or endeavour". For Denck, the starting point of all religion is the voice of conscience and religious feeling. "I know for certain that this tells me the truth. I will therefore listen to it whatever it may say to me. I shall not allow any one to take it from me. And when I find it in any creature high or low, I will listen to it once more. Where it directs me I shall go as it desires, and what it warns me against, that I shall avoid."

Why should any external witness be disregarded; test everything, and compare it, and harmonise it with the testimony of the law in your heart.

This inner voice is the reason for all faith in the good, and in a higher power which constrains a man to the good in spite of himself. For the building up of the life of faith this inner voice is indeed not enough, and the Holy Scripture rightly understood is best fitted for this purpose, for it is the echo of that which is slumbering in the human heart. Accordingly, it is the light and guide on the path of faith, without which the man, who wishes to find out by himself the dark way of the divine secrets, will stumble.

This inner word is a spark of the Divine Spirit himself. Though Denck begins his Confession, by acknowledging that by nature he is "a miserable creature, subject to all diseases of body and soul", he, nevertheless, finds within himself a power greater than himself, which resists the evil in him, and awakens a desire for salvation. (28)

"I indeed would like to have the faith which brings salvation and leads to 'life', but I do not find it in me. And if I were to say to-day, I had this faith, I would give myself the lie to-morrow, for an inner voice, a spark of the truth which I feel in a measure within me, tells me that I do not yet have in me the faith that brings 'life'."

All that he did feel was the inner voice which restrained from evil or constrained to good. This voice he was prepared at all times to follow. Disobedience to this voice entails inability to understand the Holy Scripture. "So far as this voice constrains me, I understand it, but that is not my merit, but the grace of God." Yielding to the 'natural' inclinations of the soul prevents belief

(28) Cp. Luther. "Every man is an image and tool of the devil." "Man is essentially evil, and not a spark of the knowledge of God dwells in him." "Original sin is a leaven of the devil by which our nature is completely poisoned."

in Holy Scripture. Something, however, in him - the better part and not really himself, without any wish or endeavour of his own, urges him to read the Scripture. And so he reads it, and becomes convinced that the motive power within him is Christ, to whom the Scripture bears witness that he is the Son of the Highest. He dare not say that he has the faith which imparts life, but he sees perfectly that God requires this faith. Therefore "I say, Come then in the Name of Almighty God whom I fear in the depths of my heart. Lord I wish to believe, help me to believe."

Two things lead to faith, which is harmony with God, viz: The Holy Scripture which shows the way like a light in the darkness of the night, and the Morning Star of faith which announces Christ the Sun of Righteousness. But only when day, the Eternal light, breaks, and Christ rises in our hearts, is the darkness of unbelief overcome.

Before one can understand Holy Scripture he must be in sympathy with it. A man must pay attention to the revelation of God in his heart. He who is disobedient to the voice of conscience cannot rightly interpret the Scriptures. He turns the mysteries of God revealed in the Scriptures into a

howling wilderness, and abuses the grace which God has given him.

'The Spirit alone who has inspired the Scripture can interpret it.'

"This is my endeavour," said Denck, "to love and honour God and to do harm to no man."

Sin is unbelief. When the law has finished its work,(that is, when the sinful nature has been conquered and selfishness overcome), the Gospel of Christ, which is the commandment of love to God and man, wins a place in our hearts. By listening to the Gospel, faith comes, i.e. harmony with God. Where faith is, there is no sin. And where there is no sin, there dwells the Righteousness of God. The Righteousness of God is God Himself, and Sin is that which resists God.

All believers were once unbelievers. To attain to faith you must die to your passions and your worldly life,in the sense that you must live no longer for yourself as you did in your unbelief, but for your God and Christ, so that, as Paul says, your life is no more on earth, but in heaven.

DENCK at ST. GALL.

The official statement handed in to the Council by the Lutheran ministers, and which was their answer to Denck's written Confession, though it was never published, makes a striking admission. It is expressly said, that "Denck's words were written in such a spirit, and with so much Christian intelligence, that his views might have been tolerated, had not regard for the unity of the Lutheran Church forbidden it." At the same time, all kinds of rumours, showing Denck to be a dangerous man, were put in circulation. False and garbled statements were given to the people, which were calculated to injure Denck as a religious teacher, and to turn aside from him favourable public attention.

Denck was a victim to the exigencies of Ecclesiastical politics.

The severity of the sentence greatly surprised (29) Denck, but it did not make him swerve from his self-chosen and perilous path. Never a harsh word fell from his lips regarding his treatment at Nürnberg. Driven into self-defence by the action of his opponents, he never yielded to the temptation to retaliate on the Church and Civil Power which had

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(29) Hagen Geist der Reformation, II. 108.

wrought him such unmerited wrong. "He believed that a good cause should be fought with clean weapons." There is no bitterness in his own writings, and he restrained his friends who were ready to take up a stand for him. "He did not wish to vanquish or hurt an adversary, but to convince him." "Persecution," he said, "has severed me from a few men, but my heart has not been severed from them, and certainly not from any God-fearing man."

Till his death three years later, this banished and proscribed man, who 'did not like to speak about God to men', wandered throughout Germany, an Apostle of the Religion of the Spirit. 'Privation and want, oppression and danger, he accepted, as the sacrifice demanded by fidelity to his convictions. He never deserted his ideals, and never ceased his fight for the Gospel of brotherly love, and a spiritual Christianity pure in word and deed.'

Denck left the city of Nürnberg on the morning of January 22nd, 1525, and seems to have gone to Mülhausen where Münzer was all powerful.<sup>(30)</sup> But his movements for some time are uncertain. About Easter 1525 he was at St. Gall<sup>(31)</sup>, at that time the headquarters of the Anabaptist Movement in

(30) Oecol. an Pirkheimer, 25 April, 1525.

(31) Kessler's Sabbata, p.150.

Switzerland. (32) Though he was living in the house of an Anabaptist, and in sympathy with their views on essential points, he was not yet identified with the movement, (33) nor did he accept the second baptism till more than a year afterwards. It was at St. Gall that J. Kessler, who was a native of the town, met Denck, and he has given us some interesting glimpses of the wandering Scholar-Reformer in his 'Sabbata' which is a Chronicle of events between 1525 and 1539. Though Kessler, the pastor of St. Gall, did not approve of Denck's teaching, he refers to him with something like enthusiasm. He was evidently impressed by the man who almost invariably compelled admiration, by his distinction of character and nobility of mind. Kessler describes Denck as 'eloquent, modest, learned and well versed in the sacred languages'. Denck's stay at St. Gall was probably brief, though whether he returned to Mülhausen, which fell in May 1525 and

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(32) J. Kessler speaks with admiration of the great austerity in dress and manners of the Anabaptists of St. Gall. He commends their pious and blameless behaviour. Their morals, he tells us, were beyond reproach and their demeanour was grave and humble. They carried no weapons.

(33) "Although he was not very zealous about the Anabaptists, still he was one." Kessler, Sabbata I. 280. Meanwhile Denck could not make/



with its fall brought to an end the Peasants' War in irretrievable defeat, is not known.

It was while he was at St. Gall that Denck wrote the tract 'Wer die Warheit warlich lieb, &c.' (He who really loves the truth can herein examine himself so that no one exalt his faith because of personal experience, but know from whom he should ask and receive wisdom'). (34)

Denck saw clearly the difficulty of the Reformed position, which accepted the Canon of Scripture as formed and guaranteed by the Church, and at the same time denied to the Church the right of interpretation. The Roman Catholic position claimed a two-fold authority, first to form and guarantee the Canon of Inspired Scriptures, and second to interpret

make up his mind to become an Apostle of the Brethren, but of the three existing ecclesiastical communities, none came so near his ideal in their constitution as "The Apostolical Brethren".

(34) Wer die Warhait warlich lieb hat, mag sich hierinn briefen im erkandtnuss seynes glaubens, auf das sich nyemandt in im Selbs erhebe. Sonder wisse von wem man weissheit bitten und entphahen soll. - Die forcht Gottes ist ain anfang der Weysshait. Hanns Denck.

The first edition of this tract was printed in the year 1525. A copy is found in the Hof-u-Staats Bibliothek in Munich and in the Königl. Bibl., Berlin.

Another edition was published along with the "Gesetz Gottes" and the "Wahren Liebe" in 1550 at Zurich by Froschauer.

them by inspired Fathers and Councils of the Church. The Reformers seemed to grant the first claim, and to deny the second, for Luther practically asserted that the Scriptures could be understood by any man. To Denck, the claims of Roman Catholicism and of orthodox Protestantism were equally indefensible. In this tract he makes enquiry, and finds both the true source of authority, and the key to the right interpretation of the Scriptures, in the Inner Word, and the Spirit who lives and works in every good man.

Denck's tract is an explanation of his teaching, which he seeks at the same time to safeguard against misunderstanding and misuse. The title explains the aim of the book, which is to show to whom one should pray for wisdom, namely, the Holy Spirit, who manifests himself not through written books alone, but in all men. The motto which he puts on the title page, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom', indicates the means by which the God-fearing man (i.e. the man whose will is in harmony with the Divine Will) comes nearest to the true understanding of God. Denck was in essential agreement with the conception of the Medieval Church, that an inspired interpretation of the Scriptures was necessary, owing to the extreme difficulty of

understanding and harmonising them. At the same time he could not believe that this inspiration was the exclusive gift of Popes, Bishops and Councils of the Church. He held that the Holy Spirit, of which there is a spark in every man, manifests himself in all good men, and endows them with his power. Scriptures apparently contradictory, (e.g. Jer.3, 12 and Mt.25, 46; 1 Tim.2, 4 and Mt.20, 16; 1 Cor.15, 22 and Jn.5, 21) - Gegenschriften - may both be true, but the one will be included in the other, as time is included in eternity and space in infinity. They must be harmonised from a loftier standpoint. The mere light of Nature, without the help of God, cannot discover all the truth in Holy Scripture. "We understand the secrets of God less than the animals understand our language." The Bible is a sealed book to the man whose heart is far from God. Therefore we must yield our hearts and wills to the Master who teaches all scholars, and who alone has the key of the treasure house.

The drift of Denok's thought is as follows. In every good man there is a source of true knowledge of the highest things which, besides the

tradition found in Holy Scripture, must always be taken into consideration. The teaching of Scripture is the ground of faith, but the deepest (inner) conviction is only reached when the voice within, which speaks in the best men, is undeniably in harmony with it. The contradictions of Scripture must be harmonised by the Spirit of God. The man who yields his will to God will not miss the truth in Holy Scripture. This is "the Key of David", and, without it, the Scripture cannot be understood by any man without exposing himself to great error.

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DENCK and the "APOSTOLICAL BRETHREN" of AUGSBURG.

Some time in the late summer or early autumn, (probably September), of 1525 Denck arrived at Augsburg, a wealthy commercial city with a large labouring class, and the headquarters of the Spiritual Reform in Southern Germany. He went on the invitation and under the patronage of Bastian von Freiberg and George Regel.

After a time the rumour spread among the Lutherans that Denck had been banished from Nürnberg for his opposition to the Magistracy. But in a letter of protest and explanation to the Magistrate of Augsburg he repudiates the accusation. "I know well," he says, "and have never denied that all human institutions are ordained by God. How could I accept the judgment of God at the last day if I could not suffer the judgment of the world now? Will your Honour therefore grant me permission to continue what I have begun with your favour? I trust I will conduct myself in such a way that your Honour will have no dissatisfaction on that account."<sup>(35)</sup>

At Augsburg the conflict between the Lutherans and Zwinglians, and the adherents of the Old Church was still fiercely raging, and there was great unrest.

(35) Johannes Denck an den Rath der Stadt Augsburg.  
Keller Ein Apostel, p.250.

Denck was unable to take the side of either party. The new community did not satisfy his ideal of the Church, and therefore he was compelled to stand aloof from both combatants. This isolation was a menace to his safety.

He had no wish to form an independent party. He was naturally reserved; he shrank from public life; he hesitated even to expound the Scriptures openly. But just as the happenings at Nürnberg had pushed him into the arena, so the situation at Augsburg forced on him a rôle he did not desire, and he was led to devote himself with energy, though with circumspection, ('Umsicht') to the cause of "The Brethren".

For more than a year - till November 1526 when after the publication of his little book 'Vom gesetz Gottes' (36) he left the city - he quietly and unostentatiously pursued his work of Spiritual Reform. There was great need, for Augsburg like Nürnberg was a sink of iniquity. For that conclusion we have

(36) Vom gesetz Gottes. First published by Joh. Prüss at Strassburg in 1526. Another edition was published at Strassburg the same year by W. Kopfel. A third edition, published by Christ. Froschauer, appeared at Zürich in 1550, and forms the first part of a complete collection of Denck's writings. This agrees with the first edition of 1526, with two trifling variations.

the testimonies of the Lutheran preachers of Augsburg, Rhegius Urbanus, the leading spirit in conflict with Denck, among them.

In the summer of 1526 Rhegius writes to Blaurer of "Such ostentation as one can find nowhere else". Somewhat later:- "We preachers of the Word are despised, and what wonder when the majority of the people are careless about all works of piety." He wished to commit the place "with its ostentation, avarice and worldliness to the merciful judgment of God."

The Magistrate of Augsburg had sought to avert disaster. In 1526 he reproached the people of Augsburg for their immorality. "If it goes much further," he said, "I am afraid God the Father will be grievously displeased, and will visit the town with severe punishment." (37)

The clamant spiritual needs of a city like Augsburg, with its sensuality and self-indulgence, were precisely such as were calculated to awaken to their greatest intensity the redemptive instincts of a man with the high ideals of Denck.

Denck resolved on an Embassy (Botschaft zu Werden), as he called it, and to gather into a

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(37) Roth. Augsburger Reformationsgeschichte, p.233.  
 Cp Keller Ein Apostel u pp 97, 98

Community of the Holy ("Gemeinde der Heiligen") his fellow-citizens, who not only believed in Christ's redemption, but in the following of Christ. On all the main points he was in agreement with the men he had known at St. Gall. He therefore took the last step under the influence of Dr Hübmaier, who visited the city in 1526 and created a great impression, and accepted the second baptism. His conviction that only a "Fellowship of the Saints" could save the city was no doubt the most powerful motive leading him to take this step, which gave him a commanding position in the ranks of that Reformed Party which called itself the "Apostolical Brethren", and of which Hübmaier was a distinguished preacher and representative. Though stigmatised by their opponents with the common epithet 'Anabaptists', the 'Apostolical Brethren' are to be sharply differentiated from the later fanatical Anabaptists. Hübmaier, Blaurock, Mainz, Reublin, the first leaders of the movement, had the loftiest spiritual ideals, which they sought to express in the New Community. They aimed not only at a pure faith, but at a pure morality. Conversion to righteousness and brotherly love, self-denial and the following of Christ were the principal tenets of their teaching. All



these leaders sealed their testimony with their blood.

Denck's presence in the ranks of the Augsburg 'Brethren' marked a new phase in the development of the party of Spiritual Reform. He at once took his place as Leader of the Movement, for till then the Brotherhood had no member who for originality and depth of thought and feeling, or distinction of character, could be compared with Denck.

Experience had taught Denck a hard lesson in Nürnberg. He had been courageous to the point of rashness there, but he gauged the situation in Augsburg better than he had done that in Nürnberg. He determined to carry on his work as best he could by quieter and more penetrating methods.<sup>(38)</sup> And with astonishing results. The numbers of the Brethren rapidly increased through Denck's activity. Though, as in the early Church, the Gospel of Brotherhood made its chief appeal to the common people, it had its adherents among the higher classes, and included at least one member of a distinguished and ancient family - E. Langemantel -, besides Members of the Council and leading merchants of the City. And

(38) Rhegius Wider den neuen Tauforden 1527.  
Hagen II. 292.

all this without attracting the attention of the Lutheran and Zwinglian Divines, which is somewhat surprising. All the indications point to the high spiritual quality of the new community. Even Rhegius admits that many of the 'Brethren' were "people of pious and blameless life." By general consent it is acknowledged that the Community of the "Apostolical Brethren" at Augsburg was the result of a real spiritual awakening, and sprang from the satisfaction of a real spiritual need.

There was no attempt at forming a definitely organised Church. At no time is it likely that Denck had that in view, for to him Christianity was the Religion of the Spirit, and the only bond that really held the invisible Church together was the Presence of the indwelling Spirit. But the spiritual enthusiasm of the Brotherhood grew, till at last the widely extended nature of the movement was brought into the light of day, and the opposition which was aroused was kindled to an intensity all the greater, that, hitherto, the movement had been ignored by the preachers and the privileged classes of the community. Rhegius Urbanus was furious. This Reformer has been represented both by Lutherans and Zwinglians in a very unfavourable light as a man

with no great passion for truth. For a long time he had hesitated between Lutheranism and Zwinglianism, championing now one side, then the other. 'He was regarded as fickle and factious; selfish and ambitious and a man of ungovernable temper.' To the Spiritual movement he was violently antagonistic. In a tract dealing with Hans Hut he says to him: "You are banned and damned for you have led away with your teaching many pious men, and have produced such misery that the Christian Magistrate and all servants of the Evangel have had more than enough to do".(39) The second 'Baptism' he declared was a "heresy and an error worse than fleshly lust, avarice and pride".(40) He advocated torture and death for the Baptists, and succeeded in convincing the Council. So, although Denck's position in the city was so strong, Rhegius turned the scales against him. He represented Denck as a seducer of the simple, a secret 'Conventicler' and 'Dissembler'. He warned the people of Augsburg against him. His writings are filled with baseless charges against Denck, and with uncalled for attacks on him. Denck's teaching regarding "the higher life" was obnoxious

(39) Ein Sendbrief hans Huthen, B.4.

(40) Urb. Rheg. Zwen wunderseltzen Sendbrieff.

cf Keller Ein Apostel re pp 113, 114.

to Rhegius. He said it was unscriptural. "Where the Gospel is preached," he declared, "there you must acknowledge there is a Christian Community, even though you have no evidences for it."

Rhegius accused Denck of duplicity, and asserted that for more than a year Denck, while showing no signs of divergence from the orthodox creed and the Lutheran Church, had been carrying on his secret propaganda, baptising adults and teaching unauthorized views of the Christian religion. "Denck's work," says Rhegius, "has spread like a cancer for the miserable ruin of many souls." At Augsburg as at Nürnberg there was an appeal by the preachers to the Civil Magistrate. In his statement to the Senate, Rhegius formulated his charges against Denck, and as usual a Disputation between the opposing parties was appointed. Before this, according to Rhegius, the Evangelical preachers had remonstrated with Denck and admonished him, both in public and in private, for his teaching regarding the final salvation of "the Damned and the Devil". But it was without avail. At the Disputation Rhegius claims that the preachers had the best of the argument from Scripture, whereupon, Rhegius says, Denck became abusive, called them hypocrites, and declared he

could do nothing with them. When they suggested a further discussion with representatives from the Council present, he accepted the suggestion, but left the city before the day appointed for the discussion arrived. Denck knew that in all such cases the result was a foregone conclusion. The preachers brought pressure to bear upon the Council, and the obnoxious heretic was condemned. Recognising that the proposed Disputation at Augsburg would be as futile as that at Nürnberg had been, and that Rhegius had sufficient grounds to secure his imprisonment, banishment or death, as had happened to others elsewhere, Denck quietly left the city, in the autumn of 1526. (41)

(41) Four years later, in 1530, the Diet of Augsburg was held, and certain statements, in various articles passed by the Diet, suggest an echo of the controversy that had raged around Denck.

Art.V. (De Ministerio Ecclesiastico) They condemn the Anabaptists and others, who think that the Holy Spirit comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works.

Art.IX. (De Baptismo) They condemn the Anabaptists who disapprove of the baptism of children, and affirm that children are saved without baptism.

Art.XII. (De Poenitentia) They condemn the Anabaptists who deny that those once justified can lose the Holy Spirit.

Art.XVII. (De Christi Reditu ad Judicium) They condemn the Anabaptists who think that there will be an end to the punishment of men and devils.

Documents of the Continental Reformation, Kidd, pp.263-266.

Strassburg was the next scene of this harassed Reformer's labours, and there, from the outset, his success was phenomenal.

The conditions at Strassburg seemed peculiarly favourable to the success of Denck's propaganda. There was the usual confused state of ecclesiastical affairs. The old Church had been overthrown, but the fight for the supremacy was still being waged by Lutherans and Zwinglians. Neither party had an overwhelming majority, and there was a decided tendency towards an independent position, which made the Church of Strassburg in some respects more elastic than either the Lutheran or Zwinglian State Churches. The advocates of Spiritual Reform had appeared early in Strassburg, and had made rapid progress. They only needed a leader to make them a formidable party. The Reformers were conscious of the danger: though Capito, one of the most prominent and influential preachers in Strassburg, made no secret of his disagreement with Zwingli in his views of Infant Baptism, and as early as 31st December 1524 wrote to Zwingli, saying he did not wish to decide either for or against it: <sup>(42)</sup> while he

(42) Zw. Opera VII. 375.

strongly disapproved of Zwingli's persecuting methods.<sup>(43)</sup> Only atheists and blasphemers, he held, should be punished by the Civil Magistrate, and there should be complete freedom on questions of dogma. He had no sympathy with Zwingli's fanatical antagonism to the opponents of Infant Baptism, such as he expressed to his friend Vadian as early as May 28, 1525, in a letter in which he says every other question is child's play compared with this question. "It is rebellion, partisanship, heresy, but not Baptism."<sup>(44)</sup>

As early as 1521 Capito had expressed himself adversely, in regard to the way in which Luther carried on the fight; there was something in Luther that repelled Capito from the first, although he agreed with Luther's teaching in a general way, and for political reasons endeavoured to keep on friendly relations with Wittenberg as well as Zurich. It was not want of conviction, but catholicity of mind and a disregard for non-essentials, which led Capito to seek for harmony with those whose views he shared on all important points. Unity was more to him

(43) In a letter to Vadian, 7th March, 1526, Zwingli announced in a tone of triumph the decision of the Council of Zurich to inflict the death penalty on Baptists.

(44) Zw. Opera VII. 398. \* Keller Ein Apostel u. p. 147 ff

than mere detail. 'Persecution of fellow-Christians, who differed in the matter of isolated doctrines and ceremonies, would never have suggested itself to the kindly soul of Capito.' We are not surprised that Luther and Zwingli condemned him for his liberality of sentiment in regard to non-essentials. And, as a matter of fact, Capito felt himself to be much more in sympathy with the better sort of Baptists than with either Luther or Zwingli. Matthew Zell was another Strassburg preacher of similar views and tendencies, and with the help of this highly esteemed and beloved minister, Capito, who had been Court Preacher to the Elector of Mainz, and in 1523 had been appointed by Pope Leo Priest of the Church of St. Thomas at Strassburg, did much to further the Reformation. Zell publicly expressed his disapproval of persecuting principles, and in opposition to Luther agreed, with the party of Spiritual Reform, that the Magistrate in matters of faith was not justified in using the Civil Sword.

Reinforced by the monk Martin Bucer, who had arrived a short time before in Strassburg, they secured the abolition of the old ecclesiastical rites in 1524. Martin Cellarius also, who had taken up his residence in the city, had made a considerable



impression. His sympathies were strongly with the Spiritual Party, and he powerfully influenced Capito in their favour. In 1527 he published a little book to which Capito wrote a Preface, and, in this, he made the statement that he accepted the teaching of his friend. M. Bucer viewed with great anxiety the friendship of Capito and Cellarius, and their sympathetic attitude towards the Baptists. He finally reported to Zwingli that Capito had been won to the views of Cellarius. Zwingli and Capito became estranged. Nothing definite, however, could be charged against Cellarius. Bucer praised him for his admirable behaviour, for, though he was inclined towards Adult Baptism, for the sake of peace he accepted Infant Baptism, and baptised his own child.

Under these circumstances the Spiritual Reformers of Strassburg made quite remarkable progress in 1525-26. They received many accessions from other communities where liberty of worship was denied them. Distinguished personalities like Dr B. Hübmaier and other men of unique character and spiritual power made a deep impression on the Brotherhood at Strassburg. They kept on increasing in numbers, and were joined by several notable scholars, and many zealous

and devoted men who had great influence on the popular mind.

Martin Bucer did not altogether agree either with Luther or Zwingli any more than Capito did. He too would have liked to strike out a new path for the Church of Strassburg. But the practical difficulties seemed insurmountable. There were political and other questions which had to be considered, and both he and Capito believed that an independent course would lead to disaster. A political basis for the Reformation, in view of the hostility of the old Church, they considered was absolutely necessary. They accordingly tried to secure the position of the Strassburg Church, by an alliance either with the dominant Lutheranism of Saxony, or the dominant Zwinglianism of the Swiss Cantons, or with both. Isolation seemed to threaten failure and ruin.

Then Denck arrived in Strassburg in the late autumn of 1526; and in him the Party of Spiritual Reform found the leader for whom they had been waiting. As at Nürnberg, St. Gall and Augsburg, his extraordinary personality brought him immediately into prominence. He was recognised as a Master by rich and poor, learned and ignorant. "Denck enjoys the greatest confidence," says Capito. "He is the

centre of 'the servants of the Word'." Of the preachers, probably M. Bucer alone clearly saw that if Denck was left alone he would very quickly overthrow the State Church of Strassburg.<sup>(45)</sup> That, he was convinced, would be the immediate result of Denck's success.

A conference which took place between Denck, Cellarius and Capito had revealed such harmony, that Denck assured Cellarius that everything had been made clear between them, and they were in complete agreement.<sup>(46)</sup> Everything seemed favourable for the Party of Spiritual Reform becoming the dominant influence in Strassburg. The party was at the height of its power. It had secured a leader of the most distinguished order, and yet M. Bucer succeeded in the complete overthrow of the leader on whom all eyes were fixed, and averted the disaster to the Church of Strassburg which seemed imminent. How did this happen?

M. Bucer, formerly a Dominican monk, had left his Monastery in 1521 with the permission of the Pope, and after a period of service as Lutheran preacher in Weissenberg, from which he was banished

(45) Capito later wrote to Zwingli. Zw. Op. VII. 579. Denckius nostram certe ecclesiam conturbavit vehementer.

(46) Zw. Opera VIII. 83.

in 1523, he came to Strassburg, and took a prominent part in the Evangelical movement which began in the following year. He was a man of unusual learning, possessed of great talents, and with a sharp-witted sagacity all his own. Of indomitable energy, he spared no effort, was deterred by no obstacle, to attain his purpose. With a sure insight, and a remarkable knowledge of men and affairs, his resourceful mind rarely failed to seize the right mode of action to be pursued. And he was no doubt thoroughly conscientious, and anxious to serve the Church to whose service he had devoted his life.

M. Bucer was therefore a dangerous opponent. He believed that the State Church of Strassburg was the best Church possible in the circumstances. And Capito, who was closely associated with him in 1524, observed of him then that "he was governed more by practical considerations than by a love of truth."<sup>(47)</sup> More vigorous and less sensitive and scrupulous than Capito, his was the more masterful personality. He saw what was necessary, and what was possible, and his was the dominant influence in the Church of Strassburg. And it was he that dictated its policy.

The Strassburgers had followed the strong position taken up by Zwingli against the Baptists,

(47) Zw. Opera VII. 375.

though Bucer, while thinking they should be suppressed by every other means, refused to inflict the death penalty. Repressive measures were accordingly taken, but the party of Spiritual Reform increased. Bucer saw with something like dismay the growing alienation of Capito, Zell and Cellarius. New secessions were of daily occurrence.

Then Denck came. Capito's first impressions which are recorded in a letter to Zwingli dated 10th December, 1526,<sup>(48)</sup> were of the alarmist order. He describes Denck as 'a wily man who juggles with words, and boldly attacks all preachers.' 'He assails,' says Capito, 'the very heart of Christianity, and does not leave even a place for trust in the sufferings of Christ.' But Denck had created a profound impression, and a striking Religious movement had been the result, when towards the end of the same month - December 26th, 1526,<sup>(49)</sup> - Capito writes again to Zwingli. He has evidently been moved to admiration by the spiritual power of Denck, and speaks of the extraordinary influence Denck had exerted on the Strassburgers by the integrity of his life, the alertness of his mind, and the dignity of his appearance. He is convinced Denck's is no common personality.

(48) Epp. I. 571.

(49) Epp. I. 579.



His colleague, Martin Bucer, however, as we have seen, was a man of a very different temper. He was heart and soul with Zwingli in his attempt to establish a Church in alliance with the State, which would be a stronghold of Protestantism. It is not difficult to understand, therefore, the dismay with which he contemplated the advent of Denck, with his advocacy of the Church as a Spiritual Community of believers, claiming absolute independence of the Civil Authority, and repudiating the right of the Magistrate with the civil sword to interfere with the spiritual liberty of the Christian man, in matters pertaining to his religious faith.

In the great commercial city of Strassburg, it is evident that very considerable diversity of religious thinking had been tolerated. Within the city, 'the submerged stream of mystical teaching ran deep', and besides the new Baptist Community various Spiritual Societies, such as 'The Brethren of the Free Spirit' and 'The Friends of God' were found there.

Denck, however, presented a very serious problem to Bucer at Strassburg. Described by Bucer as 'the Pope of the Anabaptists', he was the most feared man in the city. Bucer decided to grapple

with the danger at once, and to strike a deadly blow at the whole movement by striking at Denck. Denck's little book which he had published at Augsburg more than a year before, 'Vom gesetz Gottes', was chosen as the basis of the Disputation arranged by Bucer for December 22nd, 1526, and this book Denck expounded with great ability, though his determined refusal to accept proof from Scripture, on which his opponent Bucer laid most stress, created an unfavourable impression on Capito who took no part in the discussion. In the book written by the Strassburg preachers against Denck in the following year, it is stated that Denck and other Anabaptists frankly declared that they would not have their minds bound by the Scriptures, and that Denck, when confronted with Paul's teaching about the Law of God, spoke slightly of the Apostle.

At the Disputation there were no representatives from the Council present, nor were members of the Council even informed of it. Neither was any official account of the Disputation sent to the Council. We do not know what representations Bucer made to the Magistrate, but on the following morning Denck was ordered to leave the city without delay. With the Civil Authority on his side, Bucer was master of

the situation. Faithful to his principle of non-resistance to the Civil Power, Denck left Strassburg on December 24th. His departure was the death knell of the Moderate Party. From that time the revolutionary side of the movement began to reveal itself; and the fanaticism which ended in Münster followed closely on the events at Strassburg.<sup>†</sup>

Denck's banishment led to something like uproar, and no doubt his party was strong enough to defy the Civil Power, but once more Denck maintained his principle 'not to oppose force to force.' He chose poverty and exile, rather than be false to himself.

"It was a remarkable triumph for Bucer. The whole city recognised the danger of opposing the teaching which Bucer and the Council approved." Even Capito hastened to seek Zwingli's protection by repudiating Denck, and by giving an elaborate justification of his behaviour, especially at the Disputation on December 22nd, and during which Denck had said that between him and the Strassburg Divines (meaning doubtless Cellarius and Capito) there was complete agreement on all essential points. Though it was doubtless very important for Capito to retain Zwingli's favour, and that of the Council of Strassburg, it is somewhat humiliating to see Capito

<sup>†</sup> Keller Ein Apostel p. 165.



making his peace, with Denck "the expelled Anabaptist" as the victim. Denck was unfortunate in his friends at Strassburg. We need not feel surprised if later he spoke rather bitterly of those who had not the courage to defend the truth they professed to believe, and who had left him to his fate.<sup>+</sup>

The account of Denck's teaching at Strassburg, sent by<sup>(50)</sup> M. Bucer to Zwingli, was summed up, not with conscious unfairness though without much real insight, as follows:-

1. Men by their own efforts can obtain justification before God.
2. Sin is merely imaginary (Einbildung):  
nothing at all.
3. Christ is simply our example to inspire  
us with the sense of what is right.
4. It is in the power of any man to do  
good.
5. Men have free-will.

With this we may compare Denck's own words.

"The merit of justification does not belong to man but to Christ, through whom anything that he has

<sup>+</sup> Keller Ein Apostel p.166.

(50) Zwingli Opera VIII. 81. V. Keller Ein  
Apostel, p.168,169,170.

has been given to him." "Whoever looks for glory in his merit as if he had it from himself, destroys the grace of God in Christ."

"Sin is not chargeable to God." "Sin in God's sight is the negation of good." "And sin as man commits it is nothing in the sight of God."

"The Son of God is one with God. Christ is the Eternal Spirit who with the Father is one, who lives in all good men and has so lived from the beginning, who is the good itself, and has become man in Jesus of Nazareth, in order to give testimony with the mouth of man about man and goodness, since man can only see and hear with carnal eyes and ears." "For that reason there are not several gods which take you away from the one God, but all Spirits are one with the one true God."

"The means, viz. Christ, is therefore near all men, so that they may obtain union with God by returning to Him. Not that they are able to do anything by themselves, but because the Word is in them that it may unite them with God."

### WANDERINGS and RETURN to BASEL.

After leaving Strassburg Denck wandered about, defenceless and unprotected, without any definite plans. He probably first went to Basel. In a letter of Oecolampadius to Zwingli - 15th January, 1527<sup>(51)</sup> - some three weeks after Denck's expulsion from Strassburg, Oecolampadius complains of disturbances in the city caused by the preaching of Anabaptists who had been driven out of Strassburg. And from his last letter to Oecolampadius, it appears that Denck had been in Basel at least once during the time that elapsed between his first residence there and his final return.

Next we have a glimpse of him as the three or four days' guest of the Evangelical preacher Sigelsbach - a friend of Oecolampadius - at Bergzabern,<sup>(52)</sup> where he held a Mission for Jews. The Revival spirit was very strong in Denck. From what Sigelsbach says, it seems clear that the unceasing wanderings and persecutions of years, and perhaps also the unbalancing tendencies of the Revivalist's temperament, were beginning to tell on him. He was in a fixed melancholy brought on by excessive study, says Sigelsbach, and extremely sensitive when his teaching

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(51) Zw. Epp. II. 12.

(52) Zwing. et Oecol. Epistolae, 1 April, 1527.

was called in question. Sigelsbach refused him permission to hold a public disputation, from fear of his attacking in public the Strassburg preachers, but Denck replied that false prophets should never be spared, and told Sigelsbach he was like his colleagues at Strassburg, afraid of the truth. If he was somewhat embittered in these last months it is hardly to be wondered at: and there are other contemporary testimonies which show that the impression he usually made was very different from that which Sigelsbach no doubt quite honestly conveys.

Simmler<sup>(53)</sup> describes him as "a learned, eloquent and humble man." Hast quotes Meshovius<sup>(54)</sup> as saying "Nature had endowed him with many virtues, among which his modest, gentle mind and his endeavour nowhere to disturb peace and security, are prominent." That there was a somewhat severe aspect to his character and that of others among the leaders of Spiritual Reform need not be questioned, and Vadian, the Humanist of St. Gall, speaks of Denck, Grebel and Hübmaier as "*ingenia delicatissime morosa et morosissime delicata*."<sup>(55)</sup> There is an almost

(53) Samlung I. 139.

(54) Hist. Anab. p.223. See Stud.u.Krit. 1855 p.826

(55) Joach. Vad. et Jo. Zviccium. Füsslin Beitr. V. 396. See Stud.u.Krit. p.826

humorous touch but quite in accord with the Revivalist temper in Sigelsbach's account of his parting with Denck who, after a friendly good-bye, fervently exhorted Sigelsbach to seek after a higher evangelical life.

Next we find him at Laudau where, it is evident, the Brethren gave him a kindly reception. On 20th January, 1527, he held a public disputation with Johannes Bader, pastor of Laudau, a zealous and scholarly man who with deep conviction had carried on the controversy with the old Church. Both men felt the need of exchanging views. And 'both sides were presented with moderation rather than with violence.' (56) The discussion was mainly on Infant Baptism. Baptism, Denck said, was "der Bund eines guten Gewissens mit Gott." A child could not give such a pledge, and so he had no use for infant baptism, but as for himself, for the sake of peace, he was prepared to administer baptism to children. His stay at Laudau was brief.

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(56) Bader Brüderliche Warnung &c. 1527. The brief reply written by Denck in answer to Bader's views on Infant Baptism is found in this book. At the end there is "a conversation with Hans Denck regarding Holy Baptism." How far it accurately represents Denck's words we cannot tell. Keller Ein Apostel u. p. 198-200.

In the spring of 1527 Denck, who was an ardent student and lover of the Bible, was at Worms engaged, with his friend Hetzer, in the translation of the Hebrew Prophets. (57) This translation had been begun a year before (1526) by Hetzer at Basel, and had been continued at Strassburg, where Hetzer and Denck again met and worked together on Isaiah. It was resumed at Worms, and a comparison of the translation of Micah made by Hetzer alone in 1526, with the rest of the translation, reveals how much the version owed to the remarkable scholarship of Denck. This was the first modern translation of the Prophets, and Luther, who gave a general commendation to it, used it five years later in his own translation of the Old Testament. 'Both in the text and in the brief notes the version of Hetzer and Denck is free from any theological bias.'

Among translators of the Bible Denck and Hetzer take the highest rank for their scholarship, and the ability with which they did their work. Though the translation met with considerable opposition from men like Osiander, who secured the prohibition of its sale at Nürnberg solely because it was the

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(57) Alle Propheten nach Hebraischer sprach  
verteutscht von Ludwig Hetzer und J. Dengk.  
Wormbs. Jo. Schäffer 1527.

work of Anabaptist scholars and especially of Denck, it had surprising success. The Swiss translation of the Prophets, published in 1529, was confessedly inferior in clearness and purity of diction to that of Worms. But though in their Preface the Swiss translators acknowledge the faithfulness of the Worms translation, it was considered undesirable to have in circulation in the Reformed Churches a translation done by heretics. That was the only objection, and this is expressly stated in the Preface to the Zürich translation. But as Jörg Regel in a letter to Zwingli dated Augsburg, 15th May 1527, writes: <sup>(58)</sup> "A voice from Augsburg says 'What Osiander holds and believes must we also believe'. Let him show in what respect the translation is not good and let him make a better. Then he may criticise it adversely. Surely even if the devil speaks the truth, it will still be the truth." Altogether no less than seventeen editions of the Worms translation were printed, seven of these within four years at Augsburg.

While at Worms Denck and Hetzer carried on a vigorous propaganda which resulted in great unrest, and endangered the cause of the orthodox Reformation

(58) Zw. Epp. II. 65. Jörg Regel an Zwingli.

there. (59) After the Peasants' War in 1525 a compact had been made between the Civil and Ecclesiastical Authorities of Worms, according to which 'the Gospel was to be preached clearly, unmistakably and without human additions;' and the preachers were to be selected by the parishioners in each of the four parishes of the town. In the year following, this arrangement was superseded by a new compact, according to which the Bishop had the appointment of the preachers. Ludwig, Elector of the Palatinate, was instrumental in effecting this change. Two of the preachers had come from Wittenberg with the imprimatur of Luther; the other two, Hilarius and Jacob Kautz, a man of radical sympathies, and a trusted adviser of the Peasants during the Peasants' War, had been appointed by popular election in 1525. Till January 1527 Kautz had been looked on by the Strassburg preachers as one of themselves, but, from the time Denck and Hetzer arrived in Worms, he openly sided with them, and helped them in their translation of the Prophets. Both he and Hilarius became pronounced adherents of Denck, and the preachers and the townspeople were divided into two hostile factions. Kautz had so large a following among the

(59) V. Pauli, Geschichte der Stadt Worms, 1828.  
 p.333 ff. Also Heberle, Joh. Denck u. die Ausbreitung  
 S. Lehre. Stud. u. Krit. 1855.



citizens that he not only challenged the Lutherans and the Council; he openly defied from the pulpit the Elector himself. At Whitsuntide 1527 the two Lutheran preachers invited Kautz to a discussion of seven Theses which had been advanced by Kautz. The conflict ended in the deposition by the Council of all the preachers, and Kautz and Hilarius left the town with several of their chief supporters. This was in the early part of July, just about the time that the Strassburg preachers sent out their (60) warning to the Worms preachers who had expressed their sympathy with Denck. In this 'Warning' it is declared that "Denck had shown himself to be a great enemy of the Redemption of Jesus Christ, the Light of Holy Scripture, and the Divine Institution of the Magistracy." They said that Denck, by his speeches and writings, had asserted that goodness and salvation are not through Christ alone, but through our own works, and in the exercise of free-will; that Christ is only a leader and example, and not a Satisfaction who alone provides for us, and works in us, all good; that he refused to be bound by the Scriptures which teach everything good; and that he did not consider that Christians can be Magistrates who

(60) Getreue Warnung der Prediger des Evangelii zu Strassburg über die Artikel so Jacob Kautz.  
2 July 1527.

may be called on to use the sword according to the ordinances of God. But if he had thus shut out many choice members of Christ from the Kingdom of God, he had at the same time opened Heaven for the devils and the damned, who, he teaches, will be saved at last, thus encouraging the careless not to trouble themselves about accepting Christ.'

"Von der wahren liebe", 'a remarkable Christological fragment', was Denck's reply to the "Getreue Warnung". It was a reminder to all men of the love they owe to every man, even to their enemies. No greater contrast can be imagined than that presented by these two writings, and it reflects the greatest honour on Denck that, in spite of his painful experiences, he proclaimed anew the Gospel of everlasting love without a single word of reference to his own troubles. "Love," he says, "forgets itself," and he who possesses it just as he reckons all wrongs as nothing, so he must be ready to endure them in the interests of the objects of his love. He who loves strives to prove his love by the risks he takes, and, when it is necessary, "the lover gives himself willingly and gladly to death for the sake of the beloved". The less his love is recognised, and even though no one appreciates it, the more he perseveres

in it. Pure love desires to be in harmony with all and to embrace all in love. It is so deep and wide that it willingly renounces all, and will let itself be ruined if only it can make another happy. It is an enemy to none but itself, and desires only to be good and serviceable to others. It would not be good if it thought of itself. "A spark of this love is seen in some men, in one more, in another less. But it is certain that as love is spiritual and all men are carnal, this spark, however insignificant it may be in man, is not derived from man but from perfect love. This love is God." "Flesh and blood cannot comprehend it, unless God specially manifests it in some men who are called the Children of God, so far as they resemble God their spiritual Father. The more clearly they manifest it, the more clearly can men recognise it; the better it is recognised, the more will it be loved; the more love is loved, the nearer is salvation to him who possesses love."

The love of God to man cannot be more clearly expressed than it has been in Jesus of Nazareth. Through Him we have learned that God in His love will remit the penalty we have incurred, if we do not despise the teaching of Christ, but learn through Him

"that the man who helps his neighbour and is of service to him has the greatest love for God: that he knows God and has love." Consequently, it is true that he, who wants to know love and obtain salvation, cannot reach his goal better than through Jesus Christ.

What love, i.e. Christ himself has taught, is in the highest sense the true teaching. All other teaching, like that of the Old Testament, however good and suitable for the people and the time to which it was addressed, is superseded by the higher teaching of love. Compared with that higher teaching, it must be regarded as deficient and useless. The teaching of the Old Testament, that one may repay evil with evil, might be a useful law for a people just emerging from barbarism, and who had still to be educated. But the more perfect teaching is that which commands us to repay evil with good. It was not possible that any man should have taught this perfect love: on the contrary, Love itself reserved the right to make it plain in Christ.

Those who do what the law prescribes to them, and who leave undone what they do not find commanded therein, are like God's hired servants who obey from compulsion or fear. On the other hand, those who

are "in faith" are God's children. They do good out of love to God: and that is more than you can ever get out of any compact or law. For that reason the children of God have this advantage, that God imposes on them no other law or command than this, that they love Him.

The hireling only determines his duty according to the agreement concluded with him; he works so many hours a day and is unwilling to do more. The son of the house, on the other hand, has no such "laws", but he is a son, and he does more than the hireling does both by day and night, and is most loyal to the Father at the very time the hireling fails him.

Baptism, which is the badge of fellowship, should be given therefore only to those who have been called, by the power of God through the knowledge of true love, to desire and follow true love. They will then be constrained by all their confederates and brethren, (if love itself does not constrain them), to live in love. (61)

A man must really and truly live in true love, unless he would renounce the fellowship of the children of God into which he enters by baptism.

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(61) Keller, p.208.

"This writing seems to have spread rapidly from Worms throughout the Palatinate, and made a deep impression in town and country. Its effect is seen in the extraordinary expansion of Denck's ideas all around the Middle Rhine that same year. There is unfortunately little direct information about the movement and we have to be content with general impressions. But the statement in the "Kronikel der Wiedertäufer" that within a short time three hundred and fifty persons were executed in the Palatinate for Anabaptist views, gives some idea of the situation which developed here." ( Keller *Ein Apostel* v. 210)

After leaving Worms Denck went on a tour of visitation of "the Brethren". There is no evidence for his return to Strassburg, but he certainly did revisit Augsburg. The communication sent to Augsburg and Constance from Zürich<sup>(62)</sup> refers to the visit of Denck to the Augsburg Anabaptists "within and without the town".<sup>(63)</sup> He presided at the Anabaptist Synod of Augsburg in 1527, when sixty Anabaptist leaders met for deliberation. At this

(62) Zw. Opera, Ed. Schuler & Schultess III. 357.

(63) Jörg p. 682. Deutschland in der Revolutionsperiode von 1522-1526. Freiburg, 1851.

Synod Denck strove to give a more spiritual character to the movement<sup>(64)</sup>, although he must have found himself unable to control the revolutionary tendencies of the extremists who already threatened to dominate it. His hopes of a "community of the holy" were vanishing, and nothing but discord seemed to have sprung out of the efforts which, according to his ideas, should have brought about the union of all good men. He was evidently beginning to be alienated from the Party for which he had worked so hard, on account of these revolutionary ideas and methods advocated by Hut, and the old Peasant leaders who had adopted his views, but who were seeking social revolution under the cloak of religion. He realised that his own religious convictions and ideals were opposed to the growing tendency of the 'Brethren' towards revolutionary principles, and their dependence on worldly methods for their realization. Rhegius Urbanus says that Denck on the occasion of his last visit to Augsburg did not appear openly, nor did he throw out any challenge to the Lutheran preachers.<sup>(65)</sup>

(64) Seb. Franck tells us that a new party appeared this year. "Of this party Hans Denck was their leader and Bishop." Chronica Ausgabe von 1536, Fol. CLVIII.

(65) Wider den neuen Taufoden.

After Denck the most prominent man at the Augsburg Assembly was Hans Hut, who was chiefly responsible for the mischievous confusion of Denck's and Münster's ideas, which finally led to the overthrow of the whole movement.

The persecution of "The Brethren" by Church and State tended to bring about their deterioration, and Denck's party, which was all for peaceable methods, was pushed into the background by the Social Revolutionists, till the latter completely controlled the situation. The second baptism was quickly transformed under the leadership of Hut from a religious act into "a badge of a secret conspiracy". Hut is said to have been a party to a plot which aimed at the destruction of all civil power and authority. This revolutionary party found expression at the Assembly of Augsburg; and the resolution that "the Christian should never seek dominion in unlawful ways," was passed by the Assembly, no doubt through Denck's influence.

The Assembly sent out Denck, Gregor Naler and Hans Bekenknecht as Apostles to Switzerland. (66)  
They went to Ulm and stayed there till the Magistrate

(66) Röhrich in der Zeitschrift für hist. Theol. 1860, p.32. Aus einem Brief der Stadt Augsburg an die Stadt Strassburg, 20th Sept., 1527.



ordered them to leave. In a letter of 16th Sept., 1527, the Magistrate of Ulm reported to the City of Augsburg that Hans Denck, Hetzer and Bekenknecht had stayed a long time in Ulm.

Then tired out with his immense labours, and harassed by his constant flights and wanderings, and the dangers he encountered as an 'Anabaptist', Denck sought a quiet retreat at Basel. This was about the beginning of October, 1527, and he was already stricken with mortal sickness.

In Basel he found a friend who gave him shelter, but he felt he could not expose this friend to danger, in view of the Decree of 1526 which allowed no Anabaptist to come within five miles of the town, and the further Decree of 3rd August, 1527, which required of every one in the city the oath of allegiance, refusal of which was followed by banishment, while return to the city without permission was visited with capital punishment. Denck, therefore, appealed to the kindly intervention of Oecolampadius on his behalf, in a pathetic letter which recalls the Reformer's former friendship.<sup>(67)</sup> Ever since his expulsion from Nürnberg, he says, he had wished to

(67) In Latin. Correspondence of Oecolampadius.  
Keller Ein Apostel, p.252.

settle in one place. But hitherto he had been unable to do so. He could not do it among strangers for he was unfitted for almost every kind of business: nor among friends, because they suspected him to be an advocate of Sectarianism, and the originator of evil doctrines. "Though God knows that I desire only the welfare of one sect - the Communion of the Saints". No doubt he had erred in doctrine as he was liable to err again, and he had expressed himself in such a way as he wished he had not done. If an admission to that effect would do any good, he would gladly make it. That he had no home weighed heavily upon him, but what weighed most heavily was the fact that his labours had yielded no fruit commensurate with his zeal. "For no other fruit do I desire, God knows, than that as many as possible should with one heart and one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whether circumcised or baptised, or neither. For I hold quite a different view from those who bind the Kingdom of God too much to the ceremonies and elements of this world. Although I do not deny that I myself for some time fell into this very error."

We are not surprised that Denck's request for an asylum at Basel was granted. If there was any

difference between men like Denck and Cellarius and men like Capito and Oecolampadius, it was a difference of misunderstanding. A few weeks before Denck died he wrote his (68) "Protestation und Bekenntniss" - wrongly entitled by its editor, Widerruf - Recantation - in which he gives a careful re-statement of the leading points in his teaching. His own description of it is "A Protestation and Avowal about several points in regard to which Hans Denck makes himself clearer and explains himself." (69)

Though this 'Protestation' can hardly be regarded as a Recantation, it was a formal intimation of secession from the Party with which for a time he had been identified, and for which he had laboured so strenuously. In his Protestation and Avowal he really changes nothing, he withdraws nothing. His standpoint remains the same, though he makes an attempt to bring his teaching into line with the

(68) Protestation und Bekenntniss in Monatschifte d. Comenius-Gesellschaft, VII. 231-243.

(69) The Widerruf has ten articles on the Scriptures, the Atonement of Christ, Faith, Free Will, Good works, Sects, Ceremonies, Baptism, the Lord's Supper and the Last Things. "All the Scriptural Judgments."

The published edition seems to have been printed from the Manuscript left by Denck. The title "Widerruf" was given by the Editor. There are two copies extant, one in Univ. Bibl., Munich, the other in König. Bibl., Berlin.

Reformation Theology, especially as expounded by Oecolampadius. In the faith in which he lived he died. Even Bullinger, however, accepts the Protestation as a Recantation. He says 'Denck renounced his errors before the end, and ascribes his conversion to Oecolampadius. (70) (71) Oecolampadius himself was undoubtedly satisfied with the Protestation. "It is not an idle tale," he wrote, "that Denck at last came to his right mind, for I have his own autograph which he wrote a few days before he rested in the Lord - "Etiamsi nec illa purgatissima erant" - and if his friends deny it, I may perhaps publish it at some future time."

In the Preface to the Protestation Denck says, "I desire that all those who seek the way of salvation in Jesus Christ may have ears to hear the Will of their Heavenly Father. From my inmost heart I am willing that all shame and disgrace, rightly or wrongly, should fall on me, if only God be praised thereby, for He is worthy of praise and love. As soon as I began to love Him I fell into disgrace with many, more and more, day after day. And just as I have been zealous for the Lord, so also have men been zealous against me. I willingly recognise and

(70) Widertäufer F.65.

(71) Epp. Oecol. et Zw., Fol.169, Nov.9, 1528, to an anonymous correspondent.

admit that I have often been imprudent, and for this reason many have been zealous against me, who otherwise would not have opposed me, God knows. I will here neither accuse nor excuse any man, although by the grace of God I would rather do, (as I ought to do), the latter than the former. I have been so forsaken and misjudged, (but I leave that in the hands of God), that it has been difficult even for a humble and gentle heart to restrain itself. The purpose of this writing is to give an answer to that wherein I have been unjustly accused, and to admit that wherein I have been in error or come short. By the grace of God I do the latter as willingly as the former. If I could recognise that I alone was to blame, with what great joy would I confess myself guilty. It pains me to the quick, that I should be at discord with many a man whom I otherwise can only recognise as my brother, because he worships the same God as I worship, and honours the Father whom I honour, even Him who has sent His Son as a Saviour into the world. And therefore (if God permit), so far as in me lies, I will not have my brother as an adversary and my Father as a judge, but will reconcile myself with all my adversaries in the way. Therefore I pray for God's sake that they will forgive me what I have

done against them unwittingly. I offer to make amends for all the wrong, danger and shame of which I have been the cause; and never to have a thought of revenge, if they will but grant the same favour to me."

A few days after finishing the writing of the Protestation, Denck was stricken with the plague, and died on November 27th, 1527, at the early age of thirty-two. God gave him a quiet release before he could suffer what would have been to him the great disillusionment - the irretrievable ruin, nine years later, of what he had once regarded as a Divine instrument for the world's salvation, in the moral anarchy at Münster, that ghastly parody of the City of God.

While Denck for fully a year was definitely identified with the "Apostolical Brethren", he consistently repudiated much of their externalism, and it was their externalism that in the end led to his revolt.

He was no sectarian, but a broad-minded and liberal thinker. "It seems to me to be an unjust law that one should not be allowed to think differently from another, unless the differences concern

views which cannot and ought not to be tolerated."

"I am afraid many useless words are spoken on both sides. What does it matter whether you entirely reject all external observances or accept them?"

"Teach your brother to know God so that he may exalt Him alone." "O beloved, make no strife where there is no need for strife, and suffer wrong in any one, if it does not injure him for the Kingdom of God."

"The chief emphasis in Denck's teaching is put on the betterment of the heart by renunciation, and self-sacrifice which promotes love to God and our neighbour. Is this sectarianism or schism? Is it not the very essence of the Christian Gospel? Denck always said that he did not wish to arouse hatred or scorn in any man. The thought of separation was abhorrent to him, and he was driven into it by the action of those who thrust him out from their fellowship, and compelled him to make a public stand for his views. He had indeed extraordinary success. His sympathies were with simple people whose lives were very hard, and in his own life he gave them a striking example of the unselfish fulfilment of duty. These people had felt the need for some bond of spiritual union, and that he might be the better able to help them he accepted the second baptism." He

did not regard this as an essential element in the new community, but simply as a pledge of loyalty to "the Brethren". "God is my witness that I am not in favour of any disunion, but only desire the good of a community which is the Church of the holy as it may well be." The spiritual element in the movement had powerfully attracted him, and the genuine piety of so many of its adherents. In the Protestation<sup>(72)</sup> he speaks with admiration of the goodness he had found in the ranks of the Sectarians, and his heart went out to all such simple-hearted lovers of God.

Beginning as a purely spiritual endeavour after a spiritual ideal of the Church, under Grebel, Mainz and Hübmaier at Zurich in 1525, Anabaptism rapidly declined under less spiritual leaders till its final collapse in 1536 at Münster. During his brief association with the "Apostolical Brethren", Denck attained great prominence and exercised great influence in the Party. But he is rather to be classed with Reformers like Münzer, Hetzer and others, who owed allegiance to no Sect and who, while opposed to the orthodox Reformation, were never rebaptised and could only by the misuse of language be termed 'Anabaptists'.

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(72) Art. 6.



Denck in his Protestation evidently regrets his action in accepting rebaptism, though without doubt he did so with the best of motives. He did not seek to justify himself. It was an error he frankly admitted. And he was disappointed with the later development of the movement from which he had hoped so much, and for which he had laboured so devotedly. He probably saw that there was some good reason for the unbending attitude of the Reformers towards rebaptism. The principles he had always advocated, however, he maintained to the end, though from his return to Basel and Oecolampadius, whose way of thinking was very much like his own, there may be a tacit admission that a less uncompromising method, and a more conciliatory attitude within the Reformed Church itself, might have been a more effective means of achieving the spiritual ends he had in view.

"To do what is right in the house of God," he said, "is always good, but it is not every man's duty to undertake an embassy to strangers." His own efforts had always been directed towards the realisation of spiritual ideals, and he believed in spiritual methods only for the attainment of these ideals. It was as an Evangelist that he laboured with striking success. The only regret he had was that he

had compromised his spiritual mission by the administration of adult baptism, for which he felt he had received no clear call. And, indeed, to a man with his views of the Sacraments, it was an error and a virtual denial of the religion of the Spirit in which he believed. This is practically all he admits of error in his Protestation, but it is important, for it was on this question of re-baptism more than anything else that the Party of Spiritual Reform awakened the deepest suspicion, and aroused the strongest resentment. To Denck, in the end, it seemed to put an undue emphasis on what was in itself indifferent. He had paid too great a price for the place he gained in the ranks of the Apostolical Brethren, and as an independent Reformer from first to last, he probably believed he could have done the same work better, and with greater fidelity to his deepest convictions. This is all that is of the nature of recantation in his last confession of faith, but it goes a long way towards the completion of his testimony to the supremacy of the Religion of the Spirit.

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THE TEACHING OF HANS DENCK. (73)

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Denck's writings are not theological, nor are they controversial in the ordinary sense of the word. Denck goes deeper than any theology, to the foundation principles which are valid for all religion. He is interested in religion, not in theology, and in the religion of Jesus Christ rightly understood, he finds all the elements, which, for all time, will constitute the essence of true religion. His writings are for the most part religious tracts for the people, written by a highly gifted man. By his

(73) In the seven Articles of Jacob Kautz, discussed at the Worms Disputation in 1527, we find a brief summary of Denck's teaching as stated and accepted by Kautz and Hilarius.

1. The Word which we speak outwardly with our lips, to which we listen with attentive ears, which we write or print with our hands, is not the real or everlasting Word of God, but only a Testimony to the Inner Word so that justice may be done to the Outer Word.

2. Nothing outward, whether it be word or sign, sacrament or prophecy, is the power that can assure, comfort or save the inner man.

3. Not only is the baptism of children not from God, it is really against the teaching of God as set forth by Jesus Christ His Son.

4. In the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper there is neither the real body nor the real blood of Christ.

5./

contemporaries these writings of Denck are rarely mentioned. Even Rhegius Urbanus in his disputation with Denck refers to none of those now known, not even to the 'Vom gesetz' which was the only writing of Denck that the Strassburg preachers thought worthy of a close attention. And yet Denck was a very active and notable literary man who published a number of brief writings, some of which have probably been lost, and all of which were doubtless widely disseminated.

It can confidently be affirmed that among the controversial writings of the Reformation age, there is nothing comparable to the writings of Hans Denck.

5. All who have died in the first Adam shall in the fulness of time and in richer measure be restored in the second Adam, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Forerunner.

6. Jesus Christ of Nazareth has suffered or given satisfaction for us in no other way than to show us how we should walk in His footsteps, go the way which He has paved for us, and obey the Father's commandment after the pattern of the Son. He who speaks and believes otherwise about Christ makes of Christ an idol, and this is done by all 'scribes' and false evangelists, together with the world.

7. Just as the mere eating of the forbidden fruit by Adam hurt neither him nor his posterity, without their inner consent to the act, so the bodily suffering of Jesus Christ is not the true satisfaction and reconciliation to the Father without inner obedience and joyful obedience to the Eternal Will.

Stud. und Krit. 1855, pp.840,841.

They are in striking contrast to the unrestrained and almost savage methods of controversy characteristic of his time. "One might have expected Denck," says G. D. Röhrich, "to reply in the same tone to the violence of the attacks directed against him: and to see his books filled with invective and re- criminations against the orthodox party which persecuted him to the end of his days. But it is not so." On the contrary, he goes on to say: "Il presente sa manière de voir avec tant de modestie, de douceur, de charité, de déference pour les opinions d'autrui qu'on le dirait d'accordance avec tout le monde et cependant il est loin de cacher ses convictions; il les proclame au contraire sans ostentation, il est vrai mais aussi sans hypocrisie."

After his death and the overthrow of the party of Spiritual Reform, Denck's writings disappeared, and were almost quite forgotten. Hardly more than the titles of some of them survived. But the originality and depth of Denck's thoughts, the inwardness of his faith and the purity of his mind are so remarkable and striking it seems little less than a tragedy that "so pure a spring of true religion should have been buried out of sight for centuries."

Mystic, Humanist and Evangelist, Hans Denck was a religious Freethinker in the best sense of the

+ Keller Ein Apostel 12. Vorwort + p. 78

word. His thinking was clear, logical and well-balanced, and he was a consistent and zealous advocate of the truth as he understood it, and a dominant influence in the movement for Spiritual Reform. He succeeded in escaping in quite a remarkable degree from the medieval type of thought that clung to Luther and the orthodox Reformers, and in his quest for the Eternal Religion - the Religion of the Spirit - he turned from tradition, and with emancipated mind reconstructed theology on a completely new basis. With the splendid courage of a great conviction, Denck flung out a challenge to the theology of his age - Catholic and Protestant alike - and by his fundamental principles denied its validity and authority.

The general drift of his teaching is found clearly and fully expressed in his writings. (74)

They are as follows:-

1. Wer die Warhait warlich lieb hat, &c. No date. (König. Bibliothek, Berlin.)
2. Vom gesatz Gottes. 1526. (König. Bibl. Berlin) Theologische Studien u. Kritiken, 1851, pp.149-193.

(74) Although his mode of expression is different, it has been pointed out that his method in some ways is remarkably akin to that of Modern Philosophy and that there is quite a surprising affinity between the ideas of Denck and the speculative thinking of Lotze, S. T. Fechner and F. A. Lange (Keller 'Ein Apostel', p.V., note).

3. Glaubensbekenntniss (16th Jan. 1525, Nürnberg). State Archives at Nürnberg.  
L. Keller, 'Ein Apostel der Wiedertäufer', pp.46-62.
  4. Was geredt sei das die schrift sagt Gott thue und mache guts und böses (On Free Will) - 1526. Bodleian Library, Oxford, and British Museum.
  5. Ordnung Gottes und der Creaturen werck, 1527. König. Bibl. Berlin.
  6. Von der waren lieb. 1527. 'On the true love'. Republished in America by Mennonitische Verlagshendlung. Elkhart, Indiana, 1888. a?
  7. Letter to Oecolampadius, 1527. In Latin.  
Keller, 'Ein Apostel, &c.', pp.251-253.
  8. Protestation und Bekenntniss (Widerruf) in Monatschrifte d. Comenius-Gesellschaft, VII. 231-243.
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## I.

### On the SOURCE of AUTHORITY in RELIGION.

#### The INNER and the OUTER WORD.

The classical passage in which Denck gives expression to his characteristic idea of the supremacy of the Word of God in the soul, and the essential inwardness of spiritual religion is found in his 'Protestation' (Widerruf). "I esteem the Holy Scriptures above all human treasure: yet not so much as I do the Word of God which is living, potent, eternal, free and independent of all elements of this world: for as it is God Himself, it is Spirit and not letter, written without pen or paper so that it can never be blotted out. For that reason salvation is not bound up with the Scriptures, however good and necessary they may be for their purpose. It is not possible for the Scriptures to make a bad heart good, though they may convey to it better information. But a good heart illumined with the light of God, (a heart with a Divine spark in it), is improved by everything. The Scriptures are for the good and salvation of believers, but for unbelievers



they are like everything else, only for their damnation. Therefore the elect of God can be saved without preaching and without Scripture. Not that for this reason one should not listen to preaching, and should not read the Scriptures, but, otherwise, how could the unlearned who cannot read be saved, or whole towns and countries which have had no preachers sent to them by God?" (75)

There is no evidence that Denck was ever either a Lutheran or a Zwinglian. With the theologies of Rome, Wittenberg and Zurich it has been correctly observed he was in irreconcilable conflict. From his writings which unfold his spiritual history we discover that he was in the true succession of the Medieval mystics, and this idea of the 'Inner Word' he held in common with them and all the spiritual reformers of his age, in whom there was a strange commingling of Mysticism, Rationalism and Revivalism. None of them, however, carried the idea further in its implications and consequences than Denck, and it was under its influence he showed no hesitation in calling in question the entire system of Protestant Orthodoxy.

Throughout the centuries there has been an un-

(75) Widerruf, Art.1, Von der geschrifft.

broken Mystical Brotherhood of those who have claimed direct vision and immediate communion with God. The mystic is an individualist. He sees God by a direct vision of the soul. He does not reason, but simply tells what he believes he has seen. His is a personal gift. The mysticism of the Middle Ages concerned itself with a world that was above the world in which Church doctrine and Church life played a part. It was both unworldly and otherworldly. His individualism and aloofness from the material world and all its interests led the mystic to desire nothing, to seek for nothing but communion with God, and such communion he was confident he had attained by the direct approach, and without the media of Scripture, Church or Sacrament. At one point only the Reformation allied itself with the distinctive attitude of Mysticism, by its insistence, theoretically at least, on the subjective rather than the objective character of the religious life. That the theory failed so largely to be realised in practice was the legitimate complaint of the Spiritual Reform.

All through the Middle Ages down to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the great mystics continued to reveal their discovery of what they

believed to be the better way. (76) John Scotus Erigena (9th Century) had said, "There are as many unveilings of God as there are saintly souls."† He believed, like the Montanists, those exponents of a "crude and imperfect type of the Religion of the Spirit", in a progressive Revelation. He agreed with Tertullian (77) who asks 'What kind of an idea is it that the work of God should either have come to an end, or else have ceased to advance ..... Nothing is without stages and the Holy Spirit is ever advancing towards better things.' The Church, according to Erigena, is nothing more than a shadow of the true Church of the Spirit which is yet to come. In the Eternal Church of the Spirit the ministry of Faith and Symbol would have an end, and give place to an open vision of God and direct communion with Him. (78)

After the twelfth century, Mystical Communities of various kinds sprang up, which found deliverance from the outwardness - the Sacerdotalism and Ceremonialism - of the Medieval Church by their escape

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(76) R. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion*, p.123 ff.  
Beard Hibbert Lectures 1883, Ch.1.

† Quoted by Jones, *Mystical Religion* p.422

(77) On the Veiling of Virgins, Ch.I. Quoted by Jones p.46

(78) Commentary on the Gospel of John. See R. Jones  
*Mystical Religion*  
p.123

into the inwardness of immediate communion with God. They took the straight road, instead of the circuitous route by which the Church guaranteed to men salvation.

Among the most influential of these Medieval Mystical Communities were the Spiritual Franciscans, who made a strenuous fight for fidelity to the principles of their founder, St. Francis of Assisi, and the directness and simplicity of the religious life as conceived and realised by him, amidst the indifference and laxity that everywhere prevailed. Their main theme was the coming of the New Era - the Era of the Spirit, and the true Spiritual Church, with the world-wide dominion of Love.

The disciples of Amaliel (ob. 1205), who was deeply influenced by the teaching of Erigena, went further than the Spiritual Franciscans. Their strong conviction was that 'the Spirit of God was in the hearts of men now; and that in those who kept open the door of entrance for Him, God lived and moved and had his Being now.' They held that the time for all forms and ceremonies in religion had gone, and that those in whom the Holy Spirit was incarnate alone revealed the power and work of the Divine Spirit.<sup>†</sup> The Council of 1209 which condemned

<sup>†</sup> R. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion* p. 160.

Amaliel included in the condemnation David of Dinal, who taught the doctrines of Spiritual Freedom and the Divine Immanence in man. He said: "Every man ought to believe that every man is a member of Christ." †

The "Brethren of the Free Spirit", from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, were found in large numbers in the Rhineland, Switzerland and France. Their founder, Ortlieb, was condemned by Pope Innocent III. for his teaching that "Every man should follow the Divine Spirit within him." The inward experience of God, he declared, was the essential thing, and for the spiritual man the Church and its Sacraments were unnecessary, though they might be useful for the ignorant and the spiritually undeveloped. The religion of the Spirit was their ideal, and they believed that in every true Christian man there is a real incarnation of God. In the new age of the "Spiritual Gospel of Christ", the Church with its ministry and its sacraments would disappear, since all men would have direct access to God by the Spirit, and, delivered from bondage to the letter of Scripture, they would by an immediate consciousness of God know within themselves the mind and will of the Spirit.

† R. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion* p. 106  
Hilbert Lectures 1963. Beard. p. 17 ff

The 'Friends of God' in the fourteenth century, also of the Rhineland, (in his writings Denck constantly refers to the 'Friends of God'), were mystics of the order which found expression in Tauler's Sermons and the 'Theologia Germanica'. The 'Friends of God' were scattered all over the Continent, from Bavaria to the Low Countries. They constantly affirm in their writings that God speaks as directly to them as He did to His friends in Old and New Testament times: and the "Counsel of a friend of God" is the "Counsel of God Himself".<sup>†</sup> They had a profound regard for the Scriptures, and the interpretation of the Revelation contained therein was for them of profound significance, but none the less they stood by the reality of immediate revelations from God. "God has a few whom He whispers in the ear".<sup>†</sup> By an inward spiritual experience the friends of God knew for themselves, for such an experience was the voice of God to their souls.

Tauler the Dominican preacher of Strassburg found the secret of the Eternal Religion in direct spiritual communion with Christ. He insisted on man's possession of the Inner Light by which the Friends of God had an inward Divine knowledge, an illumination which gave them a true spiritual

<sup>†</sup> R. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion* pp. 258, 259.

discernment. The 'Theologia Germanica', a distinctively medieval composition, has a remarkable freedom from anything medieval in its theology. Luther had a great admiration for it, and indeed his spiritual adviser Staupitz was a product and representative of the very mysticism expressed therein. He edited it several times, and asserted that apart from the Bible and the writings of St. Augustine, from no book had he learned "more of what God and Christ and men and all things are" than from the 'Theologia Germanica'. It is a striking statement, and shows the strong leanings of Luther to the mystical side of Christian life, when it is remembered that in the 'Theologia Germanica' there is no mention made of the supreme authority of the Scriptures, nor of justification by faith alone - foundation principles of the Reformation. Salvation is attained by the loss of Self in the Divine.

In the "Imitation" of Thomas a Kempis - a lifelong member of the Community known as the "Brethren of the Common Life", a community founded by Gerhard Groot in the fourteenth century at Deventer - we have a book much more medieval and Latin in its presentation of Christianity than is generally supposed, but the Mystical element is everywhere in evidence.

Christ alone is supreme: personal union with Christ is the one thing needful. And the Spirit of God in man is the medium of communication. 'All Holy Scripture ought to be read with the same spirit with which it was written' (Bk.1, Ch.5, On reading the Holy Scripture). 'Happy is that soul which heareth the Lord speaking within her. Happy ears which hearken to truth itself teaching within.' (Bk.III., Ch.1 Of the inner speech of Christ to a faithful soul). 'Let not Moses nor any of the Prophets speak to me, but speak Thou rather, O Lord God, who art the inspirer and enlightener of all the Prophets: for Thou alone without them canst perfectly instruct me. They may indeed sound forth words, but they give not the spirit: they deliver the letter, but Thou disclorest the sense: they work only outwardly, but Thou instructest and enlightenest the heart. Let not then Moses speak to me, but Thou, O Lord my God, the Eternal Truth.' (Bk.III. Ch.2. That truth speaks within us without sound of words). 'Christ. 'It is I who have taught the Prophets from the beginning, and even till now I cease not to speak to all, but many are deaf to my words'. (Bk.III. Ch.3).

When Denck, therefore, and the other Spiritual Reformers of his time, made a sharp distinction



between Scripture as the Word of God, and the Word of God in Scripture, they were following the Mystical tradition. For Luther himself there was a two-fold witness of the Holy Spirit for the authority of Scripture - the witness of the written Word itself, and the witness of the believing mind. But it is evident that he put the witness of the believing mind first, for everywhere the inspiration of Scripture was tested by the place it gave to Justification by Faith, which was really the testimony of his own religious experience. The real authority Luther set up, though he did not clearly see it, was not the Scripture but his inward experience of Justification by Faith, which he found in Scripture, and to which Scripture gave witness. Where he did not find that doctrine he found neither inspiration nor authority. He selected as the touchstone of Scripture a fact of subjective Christian experience which for him was undeniable, and by that he judged the value of Scripture, and sought to discover by its aid what should be accepted as the authentic Gospel. He was very free in his criticism of certain parts of the Scriptures. At first Luther did not believe that Scripture and "the Word of God" are identical. In his Prefaces to St. Paul's Epistles he says:

"The Word of God is the Revelation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ wherever it is expressed or by whomsoever it is proclaimed." It was his need of finding a standard of authority to put in the place of the authority claimed by the medieval Church that led him to the doctrine of the absolute authority of Holy Scripture, though he did not go so far as the later Protestantism, for which, however, he prepared the way, in its contention that in the infallible Scriptures we have the final and perfect revelation of God, and the final and only authoritative standard for religion. Though Luther thought that the Scriptures contained much that was of no spiritual value, and much that was of doubtful spiritual value and uncertain, he at the same time believed that in the Scriptures we had all the revealed Will of God necessary for salvation, and beyond that he did not think it necessary to go.

It must in justice be said that when the Reformers asserted the absolute and final authority of Scripture, they were not consciously setting up the letter of Scripture as their standard, but the Holy Spirit whose voice is heard in the written Word. It was the inspiration of the Spirit which gave the Scripture its uniqueness and value. So too it was

believed that only as the Holy Spirit enlightened the mind (Testimonium Spiritus Sancti) could the divineness of the Revelation be discovered. The witness in the heart then gave authentic value to the witness in the written word. More than that, it was recognised that it was only as the life-giving power of the Spirit was exerted on the human mind that the written word became the Divine instrument for the renewal of the life.

What was implicitly accepted by Reformation Theology, Denck and other Spiritual Reformers explicitly taught, that the ultimate authority from which there is no appeal is the Holy Spirit, who speaks to men directly by the Inner Word. But the limitation of the revealing ministry of the Spirit to the written Word was controverted by the believers in the Inner Light. The Spirit they held had not finished his work of Revelation in the Written Word, nor did they conceive of Him as simply witnessing to the authority of what had been written, and giving guidance in understanding it. They claimed for the Spirit the same activity now as then - His living Presence and His continual speech with men. They repudiated the attempt to set up a new theological orthodoxy based on Scripture, as rigid and unalterable

as that from which they had revolted, and which left no room for real progress. They demanded freedom by their doctrine of the Inner Light, which was simply the continuous ministry of the Spirit in the lives of men. They believed in a larger and wider work of the Spirit than was contemplated by the orthodox Reformers. Granted that the inward witness of the Spirit was necessary for the authority of the Inspired Word, must that inward witness not also be accepted for the truths revealed in Christian experience, and which were really interpretations of the Word of God? The Spirit must not be restrained. If He worked in the mind of Prophet and Evangelist and Apostle, He works still in the hearts of men. His ministry was not limited to the writers of Scripture, nor was His work finished with the writing of the New Testament. His mind and will are still revealed to man, because He is in every man. His activity is continuous, and the truths of Christian experience are the touchstone of the truths revealed in Scripture. Denck and his fellow-workers saw more clearly than Luther and the other Reformers did, that religious experience is a continuous revelation of God not essentially different from the revelation of God found expressed in Holy Scripture. They sought for

the basis of Scriptural authority in inner experience, and amid many vagaries of thought had a deeper and more spiritual idea of Inspiration than the orthodox Reformers.

Denck was never tired of insisting on the distinction between the Outer and the Inner Word - the Word in the Scriptures and the Word in the heart. In this way the absolute and exclusive authority of Scripture was ended, and a way opened for a continuous revelation of the Spirit. There is the Inner Word. This is in every man, the light of nature, the Christ within,<sup>(79)</sup> and to this the written Word is no more than a witness. Through that inner Divine Word the prophets spoke, as well as all great and noble souls of every age and faith. Origen had said long ago, "We are of opinion that every rational creature without any distinction receives a share of Him," i.e. the Holy Spirit.<sup>(80)</sup> Luther and the other Reformers did not deny the universal light of Nature. They recognised intuitions - intuitions which were given by God. And Melancthon wrote of 'Notitiae nobiscum nascentes divinitus sparsae in mentibus nostris.'

(79) Cp. Jn.i. 9.

(80) De Princ. i. 17. Quoted by Lindsay, Studies in European Philosophy.

Denck laid special emphasis on that Spiritual intuition which is possessed by every man in every age, and which is above and 'independent of intellectual environment' and religious belief. In the way in which he consistently applied the conception in his theological thinking, he was centuries before his time.

For Denck, Scripture is not as with the orthodox Reformers, the one and absolute Rule of Faith. He affirmed that man is so constituted with a spark of the Divine nature in him, that it can be truly said, that God is in every man. The Holy Scriptures may contain the Word of God, but the ground of Faith is in man himself and the truth taught by experience. Where man first finds God is in the world within - himself. The Scriptures, as containing the written Word of God, "can never be neglected without loss" and "they awaken the Inner Word slumbering in the heart."<sup>(81)</sup> As an educative influence, and a means of giving direction and form to our faith, the Scriptures are invaluable. "The true scholar of Christ is free from all law, because the law of love is written on his heart by God: and according to this law he knows how to judge his actions even if God

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(81) Vom gesetz Gottes. Stud. u. Krit. 1851, p.171, 158.

had not written anything. Where there is a part that he cannot understand from the whole, he does not despise the testimony of any writing, but looks for it diligently and compares them. Still, he does not accept them unless they are interpreted beforehand through the unction of the Holy Ghost. If he does not perceive a thing in his mind, then he abstains from judgment and awaits the revelation of God, for a belief or a judgment that has not been opened by the Key of David (enlightened reason), cannot be accepted without great error." (82)

"The word which is in the heart we must not deny, but listen diligently and earnestly to what God wishes to say to us, and at the same time not absolutely reject any outward testimony, but listen to and test everything, and then go on in the fear of the Spirit. Then the mind will become clearer and clearer every day until we hear God speaking to us in the plainest fashion, and we become certain of His will, which is that we should renounce all self-will, and give ourselves up to freedom, which is God. It is then we resemble God, and aim at attaining the character of God, as sons of God and joint heirs with Christ. We live as God would have us live and

(82) Vom gesetz Gottes, pp.184,185.

as Christ lived. But it is not we that live, but Christ that lives in us." (83)

The Scripture, Denck says, cannot be rightly understood except by the light of the Inner Word - the Spirit of Christ, whom he thinks of as speaking to us not from without but from within, and by obedience to the Inner Voice which is the voice of Christ - the Eternal Logos. And a man must first believe in God before he will believe in the Scriptures. "Where God is not, there God can never be brought. The Kingdom of God is in you, says the truth. It does not come to him who is asking and waiting for it outside. He who truly seeks God already truly has Him. Without God no one can either seek or find Him." (84)

The Scriptures, Denck held, were not easily understood as was generally supposed. "He who has not the Spirit and tries to find Him in the Bible seeks life and finds death, seeks light and finds darkness." (85) It is for this reason, he says, the most learned in Scripture take the quickest offence at the truth. They think their intellect cannot fail them in learning that truth from the

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(83) Was geredt sey, B.V.

(84) Was geredt sey, B.II.

(85) Vom gesetz Gottes 174.



Bible. "And should a carpenter's son, who had not been to any of the Schools, come and convict them of lying, where could he have learned these things?" (86)

"The man who does not learn to know God through God Himself has never known God." "Scripture and the Law are holy and good, but in the heart of an unconverted man, everything becomes evil." "He who seeks God with greatest zeal, and does not realise through God that God has been in him before he sought God, that man has not yet found God and is still far from Him." (87)

Denck thus asserted a continuous general revelation of God in the human mind, and in this, as we have seen, he followed in the steps of the Medieval Mystics.

"O who will give me a voice that I might cry out so loudly that all the world might hear me, that God the Lord the All-Highest is and waits in the deepest depths, till those who should be turned to Him are turned. Lord my God how is it that things are so in this miserable wicked world, that Thou art so great and no one finds Thee, that Thou speakest so loudly and no one hears Thee: that Thou art so near to every one and there is no one who knows Thee by name." (88)

(86) Vom gesetz Gottes 174.

(87) " " " 179, 185.

(88) " " " 181.

The Montanists of the Second Century made precisely the same claim for the Inner Word as the Spiritual Reformers of the Sixteenth Century. The latter were crushed in precisely the same way as the former. The Church of Luther and Zwingli violently denounced them. By their claim to continuous inspiration, they were understood to be enemies of the Written Word. "These ideas of the continuity of Revelation of the Divine in Nature and in history, of the inner which must in the last resort interpret the outer Word ..... are only now after the lapse of so many years working themselves clear, and winning recognition as the result of a just interpretation of Scripture, of history and of Nature." (89)

The idea of the Inner Word and the Divine illumination of the soul is a living thought to-day. The modern speculative theologies that are based on religious experience must accept the reality of continuous inspiration and illumination, otherwise they can have no validity nor groundwork in reason. (90)

Through the pervasive influence of the claim to freedom made by the Reformers, the results reached in the theology of the Reformers, and believed by them

(89) The Hibbert Lectures, 1883, Beard.

(90) Röhrich's Essai sur la vie et la doctrine de l'anabaptiste Jean Denck, p.57. Keller Ein Apostel, p.V. Note.

to be final because based on the final and absolute authority of Scripture as opposed to the final and absolute authority of the Church, have been subjected to a searching criticism; and its views of God and Man, and the ultimate authority for life and doctrine, and the place of Scripture in religious thought, have been fearlessly scrutinised. The Reformers began by appealing to Reason in the interests of Religion: and with the progress of criticism it has been found increasingly difficult to keep reason within the barriers set up by the Reformers; Reason has challenged the very basal doctrine of the Reformed Theology in its assertion of the infallible and exclusive authority of Holy Scripture.

Anabaptism and the Spiritual Reform generally was a distinct reaction against the limitation of the spiritual freedom Luther proclaimed, but sought to restrict in various ways. Like Mysticism it was the claim of experience against authority and tradition. And it had quite extraordinary success.

"We have here," wrote Luther, "a new sort of prophets come from Antwerp, who pretend that the Holy Ghost is nothing more than the natural reason and intellect." (27 Mar. 1525) "There is nothing new except that they say the Anabaptists are increasing

and extending in every direction." (28 Dec. 1527)  
 "The new sect of Anabaptists is making astonishing progress. They are people who conduct themselves with very great outward propriety, and go through fire and water without flinching in support of their doctrines." (31 Dec. 1527) "Bavaria is full of disorder ..... the words of M nzer are everywhere in circulation." (27 Jan. 1528).

"The Baptist current," says Sebastian Franck in his *Chronica*, "swept swiftly through the whole land, many thousands were baptised and many hearts drawn to them. For they taught nothing but love, faith and crucifixion of the flesh, manifesting patience and humility under many sufferings, breaking bread with one another in sign of unity and love, helping one another with true helpfulness, lending, borrowing, giving, learning to have all things in common and calling each other 'Brother'."

This at any rate was some appreciable evidence of the regenerating power of the 'Religion of the Spirit'.

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## II.

### On ELECTION and FREE WILL.

To Denck's Humanism we must look for his opposition to the Reformation doctrine of the Unfree Will. The Humanists were profoundly impressed with the greatness of human personality. It was man endowed with the marvellous gift of Reason, and possessed of will power, that held the dominant place in the thought of Humanism when it directed its attention to Religion. And its profound sympathy with the struggles of the enslaved people for social and political emancipation arose out of its high estimate of man's personality. 'The Humanist wanted the masses to have the opportunity of becoming Persons.' In the Mystical and also in the Humanist Movement the emphasis is laid on the spiritual constitution of man, "the inherent and native capacity of man whose destiny by his free choice is in his own hands."<sup>(91)</sup> The Humanists were led into the most determined opposition to those who strenuously insisted on the unfree will, as Luther with his *Servum Arbitrium* and Zwingli with his *Providentia*

(91) Jones "Spiritual Reformers," p.4.

Actuosa (afterwards followed by Calvin with his Decretum Absolutum). The orthodox Reformers did not, as we have seen, deny the intuitions of men regarding God, and the necessity of obedience to His will. It was moral and spiritual impotence they discovered in man, which had to be counteracted by the irresistible grace of God, through which man's unfree will was liberated, and power given so as to make possible the otherwise impossible obedience to the Will of God. In all the theologies that derive from Augustine there is the assumption that man has no natural capacity for a spiritual salvation, but although theologically Augustine held that men were utterly depraved, his own human experience taught him that man and God are kin, and that man has within himself a direct pathway to the living God.<sup>(92)</sup>

In contradiction to the orthodox doctrine of the Unfreedom of the Will, 'an unfreedom which is not altogether removed even in the regenerate,' Denck claimed as the Humanists did free-will for man. Man to him was vastly more than "mere man". He believed that 'the Augustinian teaching on the Fall of Man,' involving as it did the doctrines of depravity and the enslaved will, was 'not only inadequate but untrue.'

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(92) Jones "Mystical Religion", p.89.

Even in his unregenerate state, he said, though a man might feel it impossible to do good, he could at any moment assert his freedom, and if he did it once he could do it again.<sup>(93)</sup> There is the Inner Word and there is the 'Power of the Highest' in that Word;<sup>(94)</sup> and this expresses Denck's idea of the Grace of God. For "Christ speaks and writes to men in their hearts from the beginning of the world to the end"<sup>(95)</sup>; this is all the Divine help man requires, and it is willingly bestowed on all who will to do the right. "The Word of God is with thee before thou seekest. He gives to thee before thou askest. He opens the door to thee before thou knockest. No one comes of himself to Christ; the Father in his goodness draws him. He who wishes to come of himself undrawn by God, ventures to think that God has given him something he has not really received. He wishes to make himself serviceable to God, so that he may not have to acknowledge the Grace of God."<sup>(96)</sup> "No one can satisfy the law unless he knows and loves Christ. He who fulfils the law through Him has merit but no ground for boasting

(93) Vom gesetz Gottes, p.172.

(94) Das inner Wort & Die Kraft des Allerhöchstein.

(95) Vom gesetz Gottes, p.158.

(96) Was geredt sey, D.I.

before God. It is through God's grace that a way has been opened which it was impossible for the whole world to open, and for this reason merit belongs not to man but to Jesus Christ, through whom everything that man has, has been granted by God. Whoever boasts of his own merit as if he had it of himself, destroys the grace of Christ."<sup>(97)</sup> "So far as a man does not know God and love God, he must remain under the law." "The spirit of man is never really free until he becomes a good man. Freedom always goes with the love of God, and is won by the discipline of the spirit through obedience to the Will of God as revealed in Christ and in the human heart. It is the Power of the Highest within that works in man's heart without any means at all, for God Himself is the real means, the beginning and the end of all good."<sup>(98)</sup> Christ, Denok says, is not only the interpreter of the Will of God, but the author of the law which dwells in the heart of Man. But not as a historical Person, but as an Ideal Power, as the Eternal Logos. Christ has given us this inner, immanent law. All depends on our acknowledgment of it. "The mouth and the heart rob God of His highest and greatest honour when they say, God

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(97) Vom gesetz Gottes, p.169.

(98) " " " p.174,175.



has made a temple wherein He will not dwell." (99)  
 "Let every man take care that he does not deny the reality of what he already has." (100) The two aspects of what are really one must always be kept in view when we discuss Denck's doctrine of Free-will, viz. the Inner Word and the 'Power of the Highest'.

The purpose of preaching, which is the living testimony of men who have experience of the power of the inner word, is to convince the carnally-minded man that he is not in God, and to pave the way for the power of God which works without means. "He who does not experience the drawing of the Father, the fate of that man is uncertain, like a reed shaken with the wind." (101)

In his little book 'Was geredt Sei', (102), 'What does it mean when the Scripture says God does and works good and evil', Denck discusses the question, whether it is right for man to find an excuse for his sins by throwing the blame of them on God. The book also appeared under the title "Whether God is

(99) Was geredt Sey, A.V.

(100) Vom gesetz Gottes, p.158.

(101) " " " p.178.

(102) Was geredt sei das die Schrifft sagt Gott thue und mache Guts und böses. Ob es auch billich das sich yemandt entschuldige der Sünden und sy Gott überbinde. MDXXVI.

a cause of evil." (103) It is believed to have been the first tract Denck allowed to be printed under his name, and it was published during his stay at Augsburg in 1526. In his Disputation with the Lutheran preachers there he discussed the doctrine of Election in the light of the love of God; (104) the question of God's Providence, the problem of the Divine Will and 'why sin, which is the death of men, exists, since it is written that God desires not the death of any sinner'. In this tract Denck declares that the doctrine of Election, with its correlative doctrine of the Unfree Will, is "a limitation of the love of God". Rhegius Urbanus quotes from the writing of an unknown Anabaptist whose teacher he said Denck had been, these words: "It is an error and blasphemy to teach that he who has been predestinated by God to salvation shall be saved." (105) "God," says Denck, "has given free will to man that he may choose for himself either the good or the evil." (106) "But we will not hear, and say 'Do not preach to us. We

(103) Otto has it under this title in his Annales ad. a. 1527. "Ob Gott eine Ursach seye des Bösen."

(104) Rhegius, Fol. CLXII. <sup>b.</sup>

(105) Rhegius, Fol. CXXVII. Deutsche Bücher und Schriften, Nürnberg, 1560.

(106) Was geredt sey, B. III.

want to be able to excuse ourselves. We want to be saved without any trouble.' Therefore we turn aside God's will, and He turns aside our will, and gives us instead of the salvation we desire, damnation; for the pleasure we will not give up, tribulation and distress which will not give us up." (107) "He who yields his will to God's will is free: he who does not yield his will to God's will is unfree." But "God compels no one to remain in his service if love does not compel him". "Nor can the devil compel any one who has known the truth to remain in his service." (108) "God compels no one, for He will have no one saved by compulsion." (109) "When some were leaving Christ, he said to His disciples, 'Will ye also go away?' It was as if he had said, 'You must be free from compulsion'." (110) All the sin of man, all the moral evil of the world is the result of freedom. It is the outcome of self-will. "The thing which hinders and always has hindered is that our wills are different from God's will. God never seeks his own interests in his willing; we do.

(107) Was geredt, B.II.

(108) Widerruf, Art.4.

(109) Was geredt sey C.

(110) " " " B.III.

There is therefore no other way to blessedness than to lose one's self-will."<sup>(111)</sup> Elsewhere he says, "If an unconverted man should truly say, 'I would willingly for God's sake be without salvation, and for God's sake accept damnation', then God could not show Himself otherwise than He is to such a man, viz. good, and would have to give him the best and noblest he has - Himself."<sup>(112)</sup> Denck's idea of salvation is self-renunciation, so that the Word of God within, which is no other than the Spirit of Eternal Love - the Lamb of God - may have free course in the lives of men. "He who surrenders his selfishness, and uses the freedom which God has given him, and fights the spiritual battle as God wills that such battles should be fought and as Christ fought His, can in his measure be like Christ. It is not counted robbery that a man should in some degree be like God. Although he is a lord of all creatures, he yet subjects himself to all creatures in the most humble way, that in his own measure he may serve them and thus fulfil his Father's will."<sup>(113)</sup> The suggestion made in the story of the Fall is that "God should be loved alone,

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(111) Was geredt Sey, B.

(112) Vom gesetz Gottes, 168.

(113) Was geredt Sey, B.V.

and everything hated which conflicts with that love."(114) "To hear the Word of God means life; to hear it not means death."(115) But there is no election - no irresistible grace - no compulsion. "God forces no one, for love cannot compel, and God's service is therefore a thing of perfect freedom."(116)

In the "Ordnung Gottes"(117) - a writing of profound simplicity on the Spiritual Constitution of the Universe - Denck deals in a remarkable way with the problem of Freedom. 'It is hardly a controversial writing, for it is not directed against any particular person or tendency, but at the same time it is evident that the author is in opposition to prevailing opinions, and he sets himself the task of bringing forward a new view.' In his assertion of an inner impulse to good in every man, he at once

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(114) Vom gesetz Gottes, 160.

(115) Ordnung Gottes, p.17.

(116) Widerruf, Art.4.

(117) Ordnung Gottes und der Creaturen werck zu verstören das geticht gleissnerisch aussreden der falschen und faulen ausserwelten, auff das die warheyt raum hab zuverbringen das ewige unwandelbare wolgfällen Gottes. Coloss I. Eph.I. Hanns Denck.

The first edition was published at Augsburg in the year 1526. The title is a phrase from the terminology of mysticism. Thomas Münzer in his "Intimatio" 1521, speaks/

puts himself in antagonism with the Lutheran doctrine that human nature is thoroughly corrupt and wholly incapable of good. "I say that spiritual power is not only depraved but through sin is utterly destroyed both in men and devils, and that nothing remains but a depraved mind and a will always so hostile to God, that it thinks of nothing else and aims at nothing else but enmity to God."<sup>(118)</sup> Denck directs a considerable portion of the 'Ordnung' against this view and the conclusions which Luther draws from it.<sup>†</sup> He first propounds the idea that the will to good is the essential thing in all doing and believing. This forms the groundwork of his thought. This will to good is 'a spark of the Divine Nature' which God has given us, and Denck identifies this spark with the Holy Ghost of Scripture. When we give heed to it, it not only keeps us from error but shows us the right way to truth (1 John 2: 27). He who walks as Christ walked (1 John 2: 6), in self-denial and self-conquest, loves God and his neighbour, and is a "companion of the Lamb" (ein Mitgenosse des Lamms), i.e. of Christ.

speaks of "ordinem Deo et creaturis congenitum". The phrase is equivalent to "The Divine Constitution of the Universe".

(118) Luther's Werke Wittenb. Ausgabe, 1551, I.99.

† Keller Ein Apostel pp.79,80.

Even those who do not know God are conscious of the vanity and evil of the world, and have an inner and secret longing after good. "See," he says, "this goodness is in your heart. You cannot ignore it. You must think and speak of it even when it accuses you. You can resist it if you will; or you can follow it, and then it will lead you in a wonderful way to where you have despaired of ever coming, namely, to God."

As for those who seek God in the depths of their hearts, in them is "a beginning of the works of the ever invincible God." This inworking of God delivers them from selfishness which is the ruination of life. However insignificant may be the germ of good which God has given, He expects it to be diligently tended that it may come to fruition, and no excuse for its misuse will be accepted (Matt. C.25). It is not true to say we can do nothing. Every man can do something. He fails because he will not. He can do evil, but if he says he must do it, he wrongs the All-Highest Who rules the world; and Who on the contrary commands the good. Darkness lies on our spirits so long as earthly passions, which spring out of selfishness, dim our sense of the truth. The Word of God is in our hearts. We do not need

to learn it from books or seek for it outside ourselves. No one can teach the right way to salvation unless he has walked in that way himself, unless he has the will to walk in it.

Denck goes on to discuss his main theme, namely, the Divine Constitution of the World and its relation to Man. We know, he says, that God is truly good and has made all things good. So far as man is evil he is without God, outside of God's domain. God gives every man grace and power to return to him: he gives no man occasion to sin. The Word of God, the invisible light, shines in all men's hearts. Man is free to accept it and become a child of God, and he is free to reject it.

"God desires unforced service: He compels no one to good, and no one to evil." God wills that all should be saved, but He well knows that many will bring themselves into condemnation. But God's foreknowledge does not determine the destiny of any man, either for salvation or damnation. God certainly knows from the beginning, of the sins, the death and punishment of all wicked men, just as He knows of the righteousness of all good men. But no one is ever unjustly punished by God; and no one ever receives the crown unless he strives for it. He must



strive to overcome himself, and lose himself, by the obedience of faith. The reward of victory is the true knowledge of God. The friend of God knows and teaches that everything he has won in the strife has not been by himself but through the working of God. So he is in rest and peace. In this peace of soul he has no anxiety: life and death are both alike to him. He cares no longer for self: his one desire is to bring his fellows to where he is. This is the way that leads to life: and it stands over against the other way which leads to death.

Disobedience and unbelief is the sin of selfishness. Its punishment is the hardening of the heart, till a man hates everything good, and has pleasure in and desire for everything evil. This is his judgment. The nearer God is to him, the more he hates God: till at last he says "It is all a lying invention about eternal life and damnation. We live and we die and that is the end of it." It is then a man comes into the state of despair we call 'Hell'. God in His righteousness lays on him such sorrows as will make him realise his misery, and in his distress of soul pray for the Divine help. The Word of God, i.e. the voice of conscience, preaches to the man in this condition and says clearly: "You have made yourself

what you are, and you have brought your misery on yourself. You have asked for it, and your suffering is right and just." If a man listens to this voice God will restore to him freedom to choose between good and evil. But if he persists in his refusal to give up his selfishness, he sinks ever deeper in misery and damnation. If he surrenders and humbles himself before God, God stretches out to him His helping hand, for God is not only righteous, but merciful and mighty. Like a shower of rain on the parched ground, a feeling of refreshment and joy, a consoling sense of Divine mercy comes into the soul. The man gets a real delight in the righteousness of God, and desires to be in harmony with it. He freely forgives all his enemies and all who have injured him. Then for the first time his heart is clean, when he is ready not only to renounce the things of the world, but to forgive every one who has done him wrong. By God's help despair is vanquished.

"There are two Beings, it is true, God and man, both of whom have power to live independent lives. But they are bound together through the Word which in the beginning was begotten of the Divine Spirit, the Divine Word which in Christ became Man and is at the same time in our heart."

Man can will and do sin: the more he sins, the more is he separated from God. So long as we seek self and disregard God, He suffers in us but to our hurt and damnation. But man can also will good: and the more he does so, the more does he become one with God. When we seek the good - since the good cannot but work for us - God so works in us and helps us that we really do good.

All separation of the Divine and human wills results for us here or hereafter in untold sorrows. So far as we are affected by them, it becomes our endeavour to seek again the harmony of our will with the Divine will. We strive to renounce self and do good: and if this is impossible, we can at least suffer God to do it. Then the narrow door to life will be wide enough, and the yoke of Christ (which the world thinks bitter and unbearable) will be wonderfully light.

The more a man strives against this change the more unfree he becomes, and Christ is of no use to him, although he is meant for all. The sooner a man surrenders, the sooner the work of God is seen in him and the fall of human nature from its true and original destiny troubles him not at all, though he may be perplexed by it. The nearer and liker

man is to his original Moral Ideal, the freer he is: the deeper he lies in the bonds of his sinful nature, the more enslaved he is. So far as he is free in the sense already explained, the good he does is by Divine assistance, and even when he is unfree, it is still in his power to give access to and suffer the work of God in him, i.e. to let the good in him break through.

So far as a man is self-seeking, the Spirit of God witnesses in his heart and conscience that he is doing wrong, and gives him the consciousness of responsibility and freedom. But he who wishes to lose self has the power to do so: not that we can bring forth any good of ourselves, but that the Spirit of God in his own domain (i.e. in all creatures) enables us to be God's children when we give heed to Him. One says man has free will, another that he has none. In this generalisation both statements are both false and true. We postulate the possibility of doing evil and of suffering the work of God in us, and so far we are free. But we do not claim the power to do good in our own strength, and thus far we are unfree. This is my view, continues Denck, of the free and unfree will of man. God has given us freedom and the possibility of being His children if we

trust Him. But trust is giving heed to the Word of God, be it for life or for death, with an assured confidence that it is for the best. It is not possible for one who does this to err. Weal or woe to such a man is the same. He is one with Christ. Not that he is perfect and without infirmity. He is conscious of the conflict of the flesh with the Spirit within him, and he daily confesses his sins, but he strives for perfection and in the end he overcomes himself. Then the free-will of man is one with the will of God.

The essential difference between the orthodox and the Spiritual Reformers was that the former began with the thought of the transcendent God, Absolute and Omnipotent, without man, and the latter began with the thought of the Immanent God, within man.

"See that you seek God," said Denck, in the Ordnung Gottes, "where He is to be sought, in the Temple and the dwelling-place of the Divine glory, which is your heart and your soul." For the orthodox Reformers, the unfree will and election were necessary conclusions from their conception of God. But for the Spiritual Reformers, with their idea of the spiritual constitution of man, free-will and freedom were as necessary and inevitable conclusions. Luther

thought of man as incapable of merit, because of his utter depravity and his enslaved will. To him the virtues of the natural man could be no better than splendid vices, for man's spiritual impotence Luther regarded as beyond dispute. Everything he did, therefore, was sinful, as it was the outcome of a perverted and hostile will. "Mit unserer Macht ist nichts gethan," he said. When faith comes, it is not something in any way belonging to Man's personality, or having any vital relation to Man's Reason or Will. It is 'a supernaturally imparted grace given by God without,' and not derived and developed from God within. Through faith man becomes one with Christ, and 'while Christ takes all man's sin, man takes all Christ's righteousness.' Denck, on the other hand, began with the Inner Word and the immanence of God in man, and then Free-will became a necessity of thought. Personality involves freedom. In man's essential nature there is a witness for God, and the idea of the Holy Spirit as a power from without witnessing for God, Denck says, is a mistake, and suggests that the intellect, the will and other powers of man are against God. But "in truth there is nothing against God".<sup>(119)</sup>

(119) Vom gesetz Gottes, 159.

The Inner Word speaks in every man, and this Word is the guarantee of freedom and enables all men to become the Sons of God. (120)

Denck, then, did not agree with the orthodox theology that man is by nature utterly depraved and unfree, because he believed in the spark of the Divine Nature, the Inner Word in every man which urges him to resist the evil and seek the good. Listening to the inner word, which is the voice of God, leads to obedience, and through obedience to that inner word man finds God and realises freedom. There is never compulsion from without. The voice within can be clearly heard: the Word within is plainly spoken: the love is insistent, but freedom to accept or reject, to listen or turn a deaf ear to the inner word remains. The response to the call of God is and must be a matter of free choice. Man's will must of its own determination and purpose bring itself into harmony with God's will. Personality demands that. The thought of man as he is in himself, possessed of a spark of the Divine Nature which makes it possible for him to choose the right and the good, and so to co-operate with the ceaseless efforts of God to win men for Himself: the thought of the inherent greatness of man's essential nature

is always present. Man's will must be free. Man must of his own accord listen or refuse to listen to the Word within, and as on his listening or refusing to listen depends his salvation or doom, the thought of Divine Reprobation, which is the corollary of Election, was to Denck utterly repulsive. He could not believe that sin was the penalty inflicted on man for disobedience. "He who seeks after God in a right and good way cannot truthfully say that he recognises sin to be a Divine punishment decreed against him. He recognises that punishment is for his good and thanks the Father for it: and henceforth lives with Him, makes himself worthy of Him, and does what is pleasing to Him. But sin does not please the Father, otherwise he would not have forbidden it; and therefore he never ordained any man to commit it. It is a lie what false Christians say, that they can do nothing except what God works in them. Then the mouth says something different from what is in the heart. The heart knows nothing but 'Freedom', the mouth speaks of 'Foreordination'. Then it must be that God moulds the will which he has made good and free, and turns it against the will of God." (121) Like all the Mystics and the

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(121) Was geredt Sey, A.5.



religious Humanists, Denck was keenly sensitive to the divineness of the soul, its inalienable Divine possibilities, and its incalculable power of determining its own destiny by its freedom of choice. Denck belonged to that school of religious Humanism which strove above everything else for Reality. He had discovered a new idea of God which involved a new idea of man. It was a liberating thought which opened out vistas of immense possibilities for men, as yet undreamed of. No bounds were to be set to the possibilities of this being, Man, who in spite of all his limitations and sins and sufferings, is in the deepest depths of his nature kin with God.

Over against a theology in which the postulates were the dogmas of the Unfree Will and Fore-ordination, Denck set supreme emphasis on Personality and Experience. Personality he regarded as the dominant power in life. "He was among those spiritual seers of Reformation times who recognised the Divine nature of man, and looked for the forces of spiritual renewal which would uplift and invigorate the whole of life, in the soul of Man himself."

"Religion has become profoundly affected by the modern revolt of the human spirit against the domination of the past. Dogmas are out of favour; we

ask for the testimony of the soul, for the basis of religion in the nature of man as man."<sup>(122)</sup> "The religion of first hand experience is not a substitute for Christianity; it is Christianity alive and vocal in personal experience and individual love."<sup>(123)</sup>

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(122) Jones, Mystical Religion, p.XV.

(123) " " " p.XXXV.

### III.

#### On JUSTIFICATION and the LAW of GOD.

Denck's objection to the Reformation doctrine of Justification by Faith originated in the fact that he found no ethical power in it. But that was not inherent in the doctrine as originally taught by Luther. By faith man makes a first hand discovery of God, and has a first hand experience of God in Christ, a spiritual discovery, an inward experience of the deepest importance for the issues of life. "No one," he wrote in 1521,<sup>(124)</sup> "can understand God or God's Word unless he has it revealed immediately by the Holy Spirit, but no one can receive it from the Holy Spirit unless he experiences it. In experience the Holy Spirit teaches us in His own school, outside of which nothing of value can be heard." Luther's teaching in this earlier period was more spiritual and mystical than it afterwards became, under the stress of Creed-making and Church-building. It is a religion of the Spirit, he proclaims in these first days. The only religion that then appealed to him was that which sprang from

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(124) Preface to the Magnificat.

an inner and vital experience of God through surrender to the Divine Will. 'Salvation is simply confidence in God who is revealed in Christ.' It is inward and spiritual: independent of Church or Creed or Sacrament or Scripture. By nothing less than a personal individual transaction with God Himself does the soul apprehend God and His love in Christ. It is a discovery, a revelation of Christ to the man within; a response to the voice of the spirit in the heart. Personality, then, bulked as largely in Luther's view as it did in Humanism. The individual rights of man are boldly asserted against the claims of the Church, and the demand for liberty of private judgment in the interpretation of Scripture puts enlightened reason above all other authority. Luther's fault lay in this, that he failed to trust other men with the religion he had himself experienced, and in its place he gave them a stereotyped creed which closed the mind, a State Church which fettered freedom; a sacramentarianism which restored the formalism and mysterious 'opus operatum' of the middle ages; and a legalism which found expression in his Shorter Catechism and constituted a Code of Morals which had all the authority of Divine Law, though Jesus had Himself given the one new Law of Love for all the sons of God.

In all this he was acting in complete antagonism to his own experience. But he had set his mind on a State Church, and its moral achievements proved so disappointing that a Moral Law - inclusive of a Creed and a Sacramental Order - became necessary. Theoretically, for Luther, all the members of the Church were spiritual priests, members of the mystical body of Christ, free from the law, because under grace. But, practically, they were very much the reverse, and it was for them Luther promulgated this Law which in other days he would have regarded as intolerable. The result has been that, through the slow toil of the centuries, the Reformed Church has had once more to "re-discover Christianity as a religion". The Luther of the early days of the Reformation with his spiritual Idealism is to be sharply distinguished from the Luther who was so largely concerned with the building of the Lutheran Church. To begin with, personal faith was all. It secured the right attitude towards God in trust and obedience to His will, and the right attitude towards men in love and service. It was the pathway to spiritual freedom, of which Luther at the outset had so clear a vision, and it had in it the possibility of the realisation of that Christian Brotherhood of common

service, of which the world is still in sore need.

"The Protestant doctrine of Justification by Faith has as its imperishable elements the religious truth that God is an all-gracious God who, for the sake of the altogether worthy, accepts us in our unworthiness, when we throw ourselves on his mercy with penitence and trustful hearts; and its ethical value lies in the fact that this filial relationship to God is the spring of the highest moral power and endeavour." (125)

But in spite of his inward experience of justifying faith, and his remarkable vision, and his resolute will and grasp of affairs, Luther was unable to emancipate himself from the influence of the Past, and with all the changes he introduced, the spirit of Medievalism remained, and the ideas of Medievalism - the demand for external authority, for visibility and power in the Church, for Ceremonialism and dogma in religion. Above all Luther, as an ecclesiastical statesman, planned the new Church and the new Creed on conservative lines, just venturing as far as he believed he could safely carry the Territorial Princes with him. His more mystical and spiritual sympathies fell into the background, and the more radical Reformers like Denck, who were prepared, reckless of consequences, to carry out the Reformation principles

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(125) Rule of Faith - Paterson, p.293.

to their ultimate issue in their quest for a spiritual religion, and an interpretation of the Christian faith in harmony with the new conceptions of God and the world and man which Humanism had made real and vital, Luther denounced and so far as he could suppressed. Among certain propositions which he drew up some time after the Diet of Spiers, which was held in May 1529, he makes this claim. "It was we in like manner who repressed the Anabaptists." Luther may have been unconscious of the changed emphasis in his teaching as he went on with his Creed making and Church building. But the God he had known in his inward experience was strangely absent from the theology he evolved out of ancient conceptions, which had brought no help to his own soul, and had no reality in his own experience. In vain do we look in the Reformed Creeds for any reflection of that ecstatic joy he experienced in the discovery of the God of love and grace revealed in Jesus Christ: in vain also for the religion which is essentially an inward experience of God in the very depths of life itself. Luther turns back to Scholasticism, and while the method may be different, the result is the same, and in the Reformed Theology we find the old ideas re-appearing in new forms, and the revolution

that might have been expected from the spiritual vision of a profound inner experience remained unrealised.

He begins with the idea of a God of wrath whose justice must be satisfied, and whose judgments must be averted. Salvation as conceived by him, theologically, is a plan for escaping God's wrath and curse, through the merit conveyed to us by the righteousness of Christ and received by faith. Luther in his theology does not think of the essential nature of God as Jesus reveals Him, viz. as a Father. He is not essentially a God of grace. His mercy and forgiveness are won by the merit and love and righteousness of Christ. "For Christ's sake" God forgives the sinner, and bestows on him pardoning grace. Man is nothing. He is required to do nothing. Christ does all. Theoretically, faith is belief in the 'Christian plan of salvation' involving acceptance of Christ as our Substitute, and God as reconciled in Him. No doubt Luther conceived Faith to be an ethical force. He would have agreed with Denck in saying, 'He who thinks that he can be enabled to keep the law by the Bible ascribes to the dead letter what belongs to the living Spirit.'<sup>(126)</sup> Still it re-

(126) Vom gesetz Gottes, 173.



mains the fact that "Luther never put faith on a moral and dynamical foundation. It was for him always a mysterious principle, and was easily open to the Antinomian interpretation that, on the exercise of faith, God for Christ's merits 'counted man justified'." (127) The risk has always been that the belief in the Plan of Salvation takes the place of the vital experience of Christ in the soul, and dogma becomes more than spiritual life. Justification by faith in itself does not theologically imply an inward experience of God, carrying with it a new and regenerate life. It is, theologically considered, in itself only the conviction of Divine forgiveness and the grace of God. It is by the work of the Holy Spirit in Sanctification, which is another and later Divine gift, that the life is regenerated and brought into harmony with the will of God.

Now to Denck this mode of thought, this whole conception was a mere "fiction" of the mind (Erdichtete Glaube). Based on medieval conceptions of the character of God and the constitution of man, he found it ethically defective, and protested against the theory of the satisfaction of the Divine law by the obedience of Christ, on the ground of its moral inefficiency. He found, he said, that many were

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(127) Jones - Spiritual Reformers.

better men before than they were after they professed to have received faith. "You say 'We have God's forgiveness and our righteousness, for Christ on whom we believe has taken away sin and reconciled the Father. We need not be afraid because of our sins. We can be in rest and peace since now we believe.' O credulous people, where is your Christianity? You think that merely through your faith all your sins are forgiven? You boast of your possession of God's mercy. Verily I say to you, 'If you do not follow the footsteps of Christ, God will make his mercy bitter enough to you. With rods he will visit your trespasses and with plagues your sins.'" "If you have sinned, do not comfort yourselves with the thought that your faith will bring you forgiveness, but be ready and willing to suffer the punishment you have merited. Say 'Lord, we have sinned. Take the sin away from us in Thy righteousness, and show us Thy mercy: we will gladly suffer if Thou dost but pardon us.' The moment you desire goodness from the heart, God is ready to give it to you." (128)

So Denck discovered the source of faith in inward obedience. "The idea that Christ has fulfilled

the law and we do not need to fulfil it encourages evil."(129) "The suffering of Christ," he says, "has given satisfaction for the sin of all men even though no one were saved, but no man can understand it unless he has the Spirit of Christ. He who relies on the merits of Christ and yet continues in a carnal, brute-like life, thinks of Christ as the ancient heathen used to think of their gods, as if he did not give any heed to them. That is blasphemy and the world is full of it. He who believes that Christ has saved him from his sins can never be the slave of sin. And if we still remain in the old life, then we certainly do not really believe."(130) "O blessed is the man who in anxiety and distress is conscious of the mercy of God, and comes to Him for grace."(131)

The voice of conscience, and the religious feeling which is immanent in every man, is the Word of God - true and abiding and authoritative - a manifestation of the Eternal Spirit of love which was incarnate in Jesus Christ and suffered for us. But this Spirit of love whose voice is heard in every man, warning us against evil and drawing us towards

(129) Vom gesetz, 156.

(130) Widerruf, Art.2.

(131) Was geredt Sey, D.II.

good has always been with men, and is the real Mediator between Man and God. It is indeed the Spirit of Christ prompting to righteousness, and so it can truly be said that God is in every man, for the Inner voice is nothing but the Word of God, incarnate in Christ, which will continue to work in man to all eternity. "Christ, Christ," says Denck, "the Lamb of God, has from the beginning been a mediator between God and man and remains so to the end."

Christ is the Eternal Logos - the word immanent in human nature, and incarnate in Humanity itself.

"Man is thus his own reconciler, and the salvation wrought by God, through which the whole damage was expiated, consists in the appearance of Christ ordained by God, who through his life in the true love of God and in perfect obedience to His will, gave an example, the imitation of which leads mankind to a like unity with God." (132) This is what Denck meant by the merit of Christ. The emphasis is thus laid on the thought of the reconciling power of the Christ in the soul within, rather than on the justification wrought by faith in the atoning death of the Christ of history. (133) Not that this historical fact is

(132) Vom gesetz Gottes, 168.

(133) Paterson, Rule of Faith, p.85.

ignored. "It has pleased the Eternal Love," Denck writes, "that the man in whom love has been manifested in the highest degree should be called the Saviour of his people. Not as though it were possible for Humanity to save any one, but that God was so completely united in love with Him, that all the work of God was this man's work, and all this man's suffering is to be counted as the suffering of God Himself. This man is Jesus of Nazareth who was promised in Scripture by the true God and manifested in due time." (134) "All who have sought and found the way of God are one with God, but to this man who never stumbled in God's way and was never out of harmony with God, who, though born in time according to the flesh, was from the beginning one with God according to the Spirit, is given the power to deliver all men from their sins." (135) This is what is meant when it is said, 'All who are saved must be saved by Jesus Christ'. The perfection which was in Him alone is the goal towards which all who would be saved must strive.

In listening and trusting to the inner word, the Christ within, we have, according to Denck, the act of Faith, for faith is just obedience to the

(134) Von der wahren liebe, p.7.

(135) Keller, p.204. Von der wahren liebe.

voice within. "He is really justified in whose heart the law has been written by the Holy Ghost." (136)

Faith then is the same as obedience to Christ. He is the Head, they are the Members, and what He is, the faithful must also be. "The members should work harmoniously with the head. Nowhere has the law been fulfilled as in the life of Christ. The head completely fulfils the law, and the member which does not fulfil its function is dead and useless, and is the same as if it were not in the body at all." (137)

The law that governs the Head, then, must govern the Members, and without obedience there can be no justification. Their one-ness with Him is the evidence of their acceptance: and this oneness with Him is "Justification". They are reckoned righteous because they have become righteous, through listening to the Voice within, the Spirit of Eternal Love.

"All who are in truth inspired with this spirit of Love are one with Christ" in God, for this inward Word is the voice of the Spirit of Love, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, the mediator between God and man and for ever suffering for him in his sin, and seeking to bring him into harmony with God. The justified man is the man who is obedient

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(136) Vom gesetz, 173.

(137) " " 156.

to the Spirit of Love. "All who are saved are of one spirit with God, and he who is foremost in love is foremost of those who are saved." (138)

When, says Denck in Von wahren liebe, one puts before himself the facts, he will understand the meaning of the Scriptures which say that by the works of the law shall no man be justified before God, but that it is the righteousness of Faith that avails with God. The works of the law, because of their relative imperfection, have not the power to justify men before God. It is the righteousness of faith that avails, i.e. the sacrifice and self-denial which is ready and anxious to render to God everything that is His, that is everything we possess. This surrender, which the Scriptures call Faith, is the fulfilment of the law of love, and bestows righteousness and the forgiveness of sins.

"To be a Christian is to be in measure like Christ, and to be ready to be offered as He gave Himself to be offered. I do not say that we are perfect as Christ was perfect, but I say rather that we are to seek the perfection which Christ never lost. Christ calls Himself the Light of the World, but He also tells His disciples that they are the light of the world. All Christians in whom the Holy Spirit

lives, that is all real Christians, are one with Christ in God and are like Christ. They will therefore have similar experiences, and what Christ did they will also do." (139) The essence of Faith, then, Denck finds in submission to God, and in a man's desire to obey God. The only faith that justifies the sinner is the faith that leads to obedience to the Will of God, which is revealed, in the first place, in the inner word written on the conscience of every man, and, in the second place, in the outer word of the Scriptures. By obedience to this Word of God there comes deliverance from the power of sin, for it means entrance into the Spirit of Christ and Eternal Love, which brings spiritual freedom and emancipation from all law, which is only necessary so long as man is not perfect in love, and in any way lives to himself. But when he is in perfect accord with the Spirit, he is dead to law, and what law is has been gradually revealed, from Moses and the Decalogue to Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount.

what Luther calls Faith, then, is for Denck renunciation, self-forgetfulness, trust in God and obedience to the voice of Him who speaks within. "Faith is obedience to God and trust in His promise

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(139) Was geredt Sey, B.VI.



through Jesus Christ. Where there is no obedience, the trust is false and unreal." (140)

Faith has as its content the promise of God through Jesus Christ, and this content Denck finds in Scripture, which therefore has a unique value and dignity as the record of God's self-unfolding in Christ; but that is not the same as acceptance of the interpretation of the Revelation as final and infallible, except in so far as it finds its sanction in the inner word.

In the Nürnberg Disputation the central point of the discussion was the question 'Who gives me faith?' Is it inborn or won? Denck's answer was 'It is an elemental condition of the soul. It is a native tendency which urges man to seek good and resist evil.' But the historical revelation of Christ has its part to play. "God seeing the impossibility of the ungodly coming to true love by means of the written law, has put between them and it a fiery sword, that is a cutting and burning word, pointing to the life of Jesus Christ which is bitter to the nature of all men." (141) Denck here makes a

(140) Widerruf, Art.3.

(141) Vom gesetz 186. The reference is found in the Theologia Germanica, Cap.52. "Everything written here has been taught by Jesus in/  
in/

distinction between the written word which cannot lead men to the love of God, and "the fiery sword that is a burning and a cutting word". The life of Christ as an example has the value of a moral demand, which stands in opposition to the sinner, and reveals to him the startling contrast between the old life and the new: and calls him to the imitation of the highest.

"By the coming of Jesus Christ our Lord, I beseech all who hear the truth of God to see or otherwise learn, that they accept the truth of Christ in the way in which He taught and exemplified it, and that is in self-denial and self-forgetfulness, so that they may stand before His Judgment Seat in safety and without reproach."<sup>(142)</sup> Salvation, then, is not something forensic<sup>(143)</sup> - a transaction out-

in a long life of 33 years, but in short words, viz. Follow Me. But he who will follow Him must take up His Cross and the Cross is nothing else than the life of Christ, for that is a bitter cross to every man."

(142) Was geredt Sey, D.III.

(143) It is interesting to find that in later years Osiander surrendered the extreme Lutheran position in regard to Justification in favour of a view almost identical with that of Denck. He uses Denck's very arguments against Luther's standpoint. In 1551 he wrote "Vom einigen Mittler Christus", in which he defends the new view and shows the inadequacy of/

side of us. It is altogether inward and spiritual and cannot be realised apart from obedience, for 'salvation is a spiritual process'. It is the harmony of our will with the will of God, the discovery and the recognition of God with the spiritual wholeness of life which flows from that recognition and discovery. "Christ has done enough for the whole world, and paved the way which no man could find, in order that we should walk in that way, and enter into life. He has fulfilled the law not to free us from it, but to show us by his example how to obey it." (144) "He who really believes that Christ has saved him can no longer be a servant of sin, for no one rightly believes until he leaves his old life." (145) "A friend of God considers the smallest thing he says or does apart from the inspiration of God a sin, but this is not communion with the works of darkness." (146)

of the old. Experience, he says, has taught that the Wittenberg version of Justification, without any reference to the spiritual condition of man, has made people "confident and reckless". This teaching, which in the year 1551 Osiander advocated, was 'the horrible error' of Denck which in the year 1524 he so violently condemned. Keller *Ein Apostel*, p. 36

(144) Vom gesetz, 157.

(145) Widerruf, Art. 3. †

(146) Vom gesetz, 164.

"Thou sayest 'When salvation is in me, what do I need more? Am I not truly saved?' No. It is not enough that God is in thee; thou must also be in God. It is of no avail that through his word in the beginning he made thee his child, if thou dost not behave thyself like a child." (147) "Can he not disinherit thee, although he has promised thee the inheritance along with other children." (148)

The means by which we come to God is Christ spiritually discerned. (149) But Denck presents us with a difficulty, when he says a man can be saved without preaching and without Scripture, for how then can faith be limited to the Divine Promise through Jesus Christ, and therefore to the historical Person of the Redeemer. He wavers between the historical and ideal standpoint, and in consistency had to exclude all positive elements from his theology, so that there might remain for Faith the meaning either of trust in the Inner Word, which is the Logos, the immanent Christ, or of ethical obedience, which is the response of the soul to the Divine Voice within.

Denck protested vigorously against anything merely formal and dogmatic in religion. He demanded

(147) Was geredt Sey, B.I.

(148) " " "

(149) Was geredt, B.III.

reality - a religion of the inward life. What he believed he saw in the orthodox Reformed Church was a religion based on the letter of Scripture, a religion which consisted in the observance of ceremonies and the practice of an external law. He therefore flung all his energies into the Spiritual movement. That Denck in the age of the Reformation, which differed in so many ways from our own, anticipated in a remarkable degree the modern attitude towards external authority is evident. Though the Creeds may lead to the conclusion that the Church still puts dogma before life, and that theological Christianity is therefore something quite different from the mind and spirit of Christ working in the lives of men, there is no longer the same stress laid on dogma as necessary for Christian faith and life. Christianity is thought of as life and spirit: and the mind of a man and the spirit of a man's life are the essential things.<sup>(150)</sup> The world has travelled far in the direction of Denck, in the four hundred years that have elapsed, since he passed from the scene of his strivings and sufferings for the Religion of the Spirit.

(150) V. Hibbert Journal, Oct. 1919, p.168.

#### IV.

##### On GOD and JESUS CHRIST.

There is a persistent tradition which associates Denck with the Anti-Trinitarian teaching of his friend and literary fellow-worker, Ludwig Hetzer. Trechsel<sup>(151)</sup> represented Denck as an Anti-Trinitarian, and Beard<sup>(152)</sup> speaks of the Anti-Trinitarian views of Denck and Campanus. He says, "Campanus, Denck and Hetzer early struck the path which Servetus and the Socini followed." He acknowledges, however, that "the moral and practical problems of religion were those which chiefly engaged the Teutonic mind." It is unquestionable that Denck and Hetzer were close friends, though it is not known where and when that friendship began. Hetzer was a very scholarly man, well versed like Denck in the Sacred languages, and in 1523 it is said he had written a book, which had been suppressed by Zwingli,<sup>(153)</sup> questioning the

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(151) Die Protestantischen Antitrinitarier &c.  
1839-44.

(152) Hibbert Lectures, 1883, pp.13,125,268.

(153) Ott. Annales ad annum, 1529. Füsslin  
Beiträge III. 320.

Divinity of Christ. Unlike Denck, whose religious interests were profoundly practical, Hetzer was a bold, speculative thinker who became widely known for his heretical views on the Godhead. Denck was not a philosophical theologian interested in speculative questions for their own sake. In his writings metaphysical ideas of God do not appear. From first to last he was essentially a Revivalist, and he is concerned with religion only as a spiritual and ethical force. The thought of the moral and spiritual chaos of his age oppressed him, and his one overmastering idea was to find the way out of the chaos into the divinely ordained order, by achieving harmony with the Inner Word, which has been outwardly and visibly expressed in the life of Jesus Christ. Rhegius in his "Ein Sendbrieff hans Hutten" tells us about a tract which Denck had written in 1526, to show "that God is one, and in that oneness all discordant things may be harmonised." 'Though the tract has not yet been found, we may assume that it is preserved somewhere.' It would doubtless corroborate the opinion that speculative questions relating to the Divine Nature did not interest Denck, except so far as they had a bearing on religious life and experience, and it is only in this connection that we are

able to form any ideas about his views on the nature of God. Capito,<sup>(154)</sup> however, in his letter to Zwingli (6th Feb. 1525), who had written enquiring what were the true reasons for Denck's expulsion from Nürnberg, says that 'Denck's opposition to the equality of the Son and the Holy Spirit with the Father, was the real subject of accusation,' and Capito ascribes the spread of such views to 'the ill-considered presentation of the Gospel by men like Osiander.' While there is nothing controversial in Denck's writings, it is not unlikely that he dissented from the orthodox dogma of the Trinity, without setting forth any clearly formulated idea of his own, and the Spiritual Reform which he sought he no doubt believed could be attained, without entering on a controversy that could lead to no practical results.

That he did not accept the orthodox dogma of the Trinity, then, may be presumed. "Almightiness, Goodness and Righteousness - that is the Trinity, the one and only Trinity of God." These words are found in the 'Ordnung Gottes', but they can hardly be taken as a pronouncement on the theological dogma of the Trinity. What he would have put in the place of the orthodox doctrine, if he had been a

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(154) Epp. I. 470.



philosophical theologian, there is no evidence to show. In the absence of anything definite in his writings, it is unfair to make inferences from what were simply practical expositions of Christian life, and brief manifestoes of what he conceived was of the essence of Spiritual Religion. Had he belonged to a later age, it is possible that the development of his ideas would have taken the line of thought followed by the speculative theologians of the Nineteenth Century, who, like Denck, laid special emphasis on subjective experience.

Denck taught with unfailing consistency the Gospel of the infinite love of God. How far he stood from that extreme expression of the old medieval concept of God from which Luther never got free is evident. In *De Servo Arbitrio - The Unfree Will* - Luther says (1525) "This is the acme of faith to believe that God who saves so few and condemns so many is merciful: that He is just who at His own pleasure has made us necessarily doomed to damnation so that ..... He seems to delight in the tortures of the wretched and to be more deserving of hatred than of love. If by any effort of reason I could conceive how God, who shows so much anger and harshness, could be merciful and just, there would be no need of faith."

In an age when the wrath of God and the necessity of expiation were dominant ideas in theology, Denck held firmly to the thought of God as Essential Love. "The one thing is love. Love is of God Himself: and he who does not have God, no creature can help him, even though he be lord of all. But he who has God has all creatures, even if there were none." (155) God is the Spirit of Love who has always been revealing, unfolding and giving Himself to men in ways they could understand, and in the fullness of time this spirit of love became incarnate in Jesus Christ. This was a new interpretation of God - a re-discovery of God through Christ and in terms of His revelation of Divine Love. According to Denck it is a spark of the Spirit of Eternal love, the Lamb of God, the Logos incarnate in humanity, that is experienced in the inner word. As God is alone real and permanent in the universe, sin and evil, so far as they cannot be used for the advancement of good in man, are unreal and transitory. "Sin is really nothing; subjectively, mere folly, objectively, mere negation." "Sin belongs not to the Ego but to the Non-Ego." (156) Goodness alone persists, for goodness is native to the soul, whereas sin is disease and death.

(155) Vom gesetz, 185.

(156) " " 160, 165.

The significance of the Person and Work of the Redeemer is found in this. By His example 'He paved the way to life'. And so the Imitation of Christ becomes the path to salvation and perfection, for the man who follows Christ in his own life realises his unity with God. Denck does not deny the suffering of Christ for us, but puts more emphasis on the thought of our suffering with Him. He presents Christ rather as 'an example to be followed than a sacrifice to be pleaded.'

The historical testimony of Christ and the inner testimony of the Logos are aspects of one and the same thing. It is God manifesting Himself, and showing the way by which the soul can achieve unity with God. It might seem as if the assertion of God's inward working in man, so as to bring about his enlightenment and regeneration, made the historical manifestation unnecessary, but the historical Christ as a true Mediator between God and man, and the objective testimony about Him, is recognised by Denck as the subjective means of salvation. Denck holds fast to the historical Personality of the Redeemer. Jesus Christ is the perfect manifestation of the Love of God. "God in Jesus Christ laid aside his right to Divinity that his love might appear complete." (157)

The Father-heart is discovered in Christ, who, in His life of suffering and in His death, revealed the immeasurable suffering inflicted on love by sin.

Jesus Christ, then, according to Denck, is the perfect unfolding of the heart of God, and when man finds the witness for it in the deepest depths of his own nature, under its compelling attraction he denies his sinful self, is morally transformed, and becomes like Christ. This is salvation by Faith, which is a spiritual experience mediated through the Divine Word, and which is expressed outwardly in the historical Jesus, and inwardly in the Voice of God.

According to Denck the life of Christ recorded in the Scriptures is the reflection of an idea which, even independently of its historical expression in the God-man, has the power to produce the religious process in the soul and to make of man a Christ. It might seem as if the specific dignity of Christ is in this way lost, but it is to be remembered that for Denck the Word of God within is none other than the Logos himself, who was historically revealed in Jesus Christ, and whose life became the pattern and inspiration of the divinely human life.

As regards the Person of Christ, Denck teaches that in Him is found the real unity of the Divine and

human, and therefore in him the First-born Son of God appeared. Christ is not only an Example for others that they might realise in themselves the same unity they see in him, but the First-born Son of God to whom the Elect attach themselves as brothers, in virtue of their having the same birth-right as he. (158) Denck approached the viewpoint of Hegel and the Hegelian Christology. In Christ is seen the Logos, the universal Life-principle, which is ever working for the restoration and perfection of man. He is the Head from which the perfection and blessedness of the God-man communicates itself to believers in the way in which Denck describes, viz. in the relation of Christ and the Redeemed as a communion between the head and the various members of the body. His Idealism, however, sometimes seems to conflict with the clear conception of the self-unfolding of God in History, culminating in a unique Incarnation in Jesus Christ, and there is the tendency to dissolve the historical Christ into a merely Ideal Christ - a Christ who is the Eternal Word incarnate in Humanity, and who comes to full self-consciousness in the Redeemed.

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(158) Stud. u. Krit. 1851, p.191.

V.

On the LAST THINGS.

The new Humanist conception of man led to a new conception of his future destiny. Vadian, the distinguished friend of Zwingli, made the acquaintance of Denck at St. Gall, and was evidently much impressed by him. In the course of some interesting details given after Denck's death, he speaks of him as "that remarkable young man whose talents were so extraordinarily developed that he surpassed his years and appeared greater than himself," and he tells us that he found Denck an enthusiastic believer in the salvation of 'the lost'.<sup>(159)</sup> His whole spiritual energy, according to Vadian, was concentrated on that one idea. He showed the greatest hostility to the Church Doctrine that destiny is irrevocably fixed in this life,<sup>(160)</sup> and that "God gives everlasting life to the elect and everlasting punishment to the

(159) Joach. Vad. ad Jo. Zviccium Constant. ep.  
(Cal. Aug. 1540) Füsslin Beit. V. 396.  
Cp. Hagenbach, I. pp.249,253.

(160) Diet of Augsburg, Art.XVII. De Christi Reditu  
ad Judicium. Item docent quod Christus appa-  
parebit in consummatione mundi ad judicandum,  
et mortuous omnes resuscitabit, piis et  
electis dabit vitam oeternam et perpetua  
gaudia/

damned." The texts quoted against him Denck cleverly met with other texts: but the boundless Mercy of God - His necessary and unchangeable Love - was the principal argument on which he relied. "The voice of my heart, of which I am quite certain that it tells me the truth, assures me that God is just and merciful, and this voice speaks loudly and clearly in every good heart, and the louder and more clearly, the better a man is." God has through Christ commanded men to love their enemies. He cannot do less Himself. Punishment is the means of which God makes use in order to effect the lasting good of all men. Franck<sup>(161)</sup> is quite explicit, and says that Denck held the view of Origen, that God's love would finally prevail and all would be saved, even lost souls and the devil. It is true that in his writings Denck has no reference to the final salvation of the devil, for in all probability he did not believe in the existence of the personal devil.<sup>(162)</sup> To him

gaudia, impios autem homines ac diabolos  
condemnabit, ut sine fine crucientur.  
Documents of the Continental Reformation.  
Kidd, p.266.

(161) Franck, Chronica III. 135.

(162) Of the Anabaptists Urbanus Rhegius says:  
"They denied the existence of the devil"  
(Urb. Rheg. Zwen wunderseltzam Sendbrief &c.)  
"Was bittet ihr wider den Teufel so doch  
etliche unter euch sprechen es sei Kein  
Teufel."

there was nothing real in the world but God, and therefore anything opposed to God was essential nothingness. Nor did he really believe in the existence of "lost souls", in the orthodox sense of the term. In this world or in any world the voice of the Inner Word would continue to be heard, and would go on striving to win man for God, till at last love would prevail.

The material Hell of the orthodox creeds naturally disappeared, as well as the idea of its endlessness. According to Denck's conceptions of the nature of God and the constitution of man, penalty in the future for unrepented and unforgiven sin can in no essential point differ from penalty in the present. There will be a time of bitterness and suffering for those who turn away from the Word of God, until they return to Him. "The world will not have the Word of God, and proves that undeniably by its works. The time will come, therefore, as God has spoken by His servants and His Son, that when they shall seek Him they shall not be able to find Him." (163) In a passage in the *Ordnung Gottes* he writes: "The hell of the ungodly is the torture of conscience, and begins when on the one hand a man is

(163) *Vom gesetz Gottes*, 181.



shown his sin and unbelief, and on the other hand, the righteousness of God; and the gnawing of conscience proclaims to him his just condemnation. Not that he will or must remain there, and that there is no mercy in hell." (164) Though Denck in this place is not speaking of man's condition beyond the grave, but rather of the awakened sinner's experience in this life which he represents after the manner of the 'Theologia Germanica' as a transitory passing into hell, the words are quite legitimately taken to apply to the future, for in all worlds, according to Denck's ideas, God's methods of dealing with man are the same. Hell is more than remorse, when man becomes conscious of his sin. Denck looked for a change in character such as mere remorse could never bring. In punishment he sees only the means God uses, so that sooner or later he may bring all sinners to Himself, and show Himself towards them as He is in His goodness, and give them the best and the noblest He has - Himself. (165)

Expiation and reconciliation with God take place in the individual himself, therefore "A man who does not open his heart to God can get nothing better than

(164) Franck, Hetzerkronik, 392. Arnold I. 1303<sup>b</sup>.

(165) Vom gesetz, 168. Cp. Hagen II. 285.

damnation. God would gladly give him something better, if only he were able to receive it. But no one can receive anything from God, if he is not prepared to receive it." (166) "Woe to him who looks otherwise than to this goal - the Imitation of Christ - for he who thinks that he belongs to Christ must also go the way that Christ has gone: by this way we reach the eternal mansions. He who goes not that way will err eternally." (167) "I pray that all who hear the truth of God may see that they accept the truth as Christ has taught and proved it, which is self-denial and self-forgetfulness. Otherwise if they do not return to Him, though the Lord gives them time to return, they will have their portion with those who first conceived and gave birth to the lie, which is the heir of the gnawing worm that never dies, and the everlasting fire that can never be quenched." (168)

In the letter of P. Gynora<sup>†</sup> to Zwingli (22nd August 1526) are some observations about Denck. It is a letter full of violent prejudice, and a virulence which suggests anxiety to secure Zwingli's favour and protection, by vicious comments on a man who was distasteful to Zwingli. P. Gynora<sup>†</sup> was afterwards

(166) Vom gesetz, 168.

(167) Vom gesetz Gottes, 153.

(168) Was geredt Sey, D.III.

† Keller Ein Apostel.  
p.21

publicly flogged by the Magistrate at Basel, and banished ignominiously from the State for disgraceful crimes. He cannot therefore be regarded as a credible witness against Denck. He speaks of Denck, however, as the most important man among the Anabaptists, "homo mire pestilens et lubricus", and charges him with disingenuousness in the way in which he played with words, and put a meaning of his own into them. He further represents him as dwelling upon his favourite theme (Lieblingsthema) - that the lost and the devils will be saved.

Denck was quite in harmony with the teaching of German Mysticism in advocating this doctrine. The 'Theologia Germanica' took a similar view. "If the Evil Spirit himself could come into true obedience he would become an angel of light and all his sins and wickedness would be healed and blotted out and forgiven at once." (Ch.16) Again in Ch.51, "But in hell every one will have self-will; therefore there is all manner of sin and wickedness. So is it also here on earth. But if there were one in hell who should get rid of his self-will and call nothing his own, he would come out of hell into heaven." (169)

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(169) Stud. u. Krit. 1855. Heberle, p.828.  
Miss Winkworth's Translation of Theol. Germ.

It is to Sigelsbach of Bergzabern<sup>(170)</sup> we owe our knowledge of Denck's argument from Scripture, (an argument which impressed Vadian as clever), for his doctrine of the final salvation of the "lost". Sigelsbach was greatly disturbed by this teaching of Denck, for he believed it to be a dangerous doctrine with disastrous moral consequences, especially if preached as publicly as Denck did. He therefore wrote to his old professor Oecolampadius about it. It is from this letter we learn the nature of Denck's argument.

Though he found corroboration of his teaching in Scripture, he did not rely on proof-texts from Scripture. That would have been to contradict his teaching on the inspiration of the inner word, and the witness of Scripture to its authority. All was really based on his conception of God. "The love of God seemed to him to demand of necessity not only a general proclamation of salvation, but a general realisation of it."

This is the tenour of his argument from Scripture. God is love (id est, non ira est sed omnium miserebitur). Jesus has said, 'There shall be one flock, one shepherd'. Denck points to the parallel drawn by Paul between Adam and Christ. If all fell

(170) Zwing. et Oecol. epistolae, p.197. 1 April 1527. See Vadian's Letter.

with Adam, all will be restored with Christ. He quotes Roms.5,18; 11,32: "God has shut up all in unbelief that He might be gracious to all." On 1 Cor.15,22-28, he remarks that it is evident that the blasphemy of the damned must end, so that, after the destruction of all the powers of darkness, God alone may be all in all. He makes use of Peter's reference to Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison. In Col.1,20, which speaks of the wide-sweeping nature of the redemption accomplished by Christ, Denck, like Origen, found, in the phrase τὰ ἐν τῇ γῇ, words which included the world of the lost, "quae in terra id est quae in inferno sunt". Even when God is angry, he said, it is only that He may be the more gracious, (irascitur ut faciat opus suum et miscreatur), for He does not will the death of a sinner but that all may live (1 Tim.2,4). Eternal in the Old and New Testament does not mean everlasting but long. In the Old Testament the Ceremonial law is described as eternal, but it has been abolished in the New Testament. Bullinger summed up Denck's teaching in two sentences: God can be angry but not eternally. And eternal does not mean everlasting but long. (171)

(171) Bullinger, Der Wiedertäufer Ursprung &c.  
Fol.64<sup>b</sup>, 65<sup>b</sup>. See Heberle, Theod. Stud. u. Krit. 1855  
p. 827-829.

The revised eschatology of Denck is based on his conception of the character of God, and the spiritual constitution of man, whose destiny is determined by the direction of the inner life, and in accordance with principles which are operative in the same way here and hereafter. Heaven and Hell are no longer eschatological. They are not really last things in the sense that they are the final dwelling places of the 'saved' and the 'lost'. They are not places at all, but inward states of soul for or against God; in harmony with, or in discord with the Will of God. They are not extraordinary, but ordinary effects of the attitude of the mind and will of man to God. Heaven and Hell are to be understood, therefore, as present realities, the inevitable consequences of the character of the soul's relationship to God. Heaven is realised when the human is in complete harmony with the Divine will; when the Divine purpose is accepted as the highest and the best for man; when the Spirit of Divine love, the unrestrained outgoing of the Word of God, and 'the power of the Highest' within, leads to love on man's part for what God loves. Hell is also an inward condition - here and hereafter - a life chaotic and miserable, because out of harmony with God and His Will. It is the

moral and spiritual state involved in selfishness . which is the contradiction of love: the inner condition of spirit and life that must therefore be changed and disappear, before salvation can be attained. "When God threatens the ungodly with eternal fire, it is not that he wishes fire to be eternal, but that men should recognise their ungodliness to be such, that, though they were to live here for ever, they would always sin and never be converted to God." (172) From his views of the freedom of man and the nature of sin, however, Denck had the expectation that, under the influence of the cleansing fires of an awakened conscience, men will be brought to realise the folly of their hostility to God, will weary themselves out with sin, and finally return to God. "The Scribes say without consideration and discernment, 'Only believe and it will be well with your soul.' So they cry 'Peace, Peace.' Verily I say to you, 'If you confidently believe that, you may drink the cup of earthly joy in peace, but it cannot be otherwise than that you must also taste the bitter chalice of the Divine wrath. But if you drink it in God's name, and trust in Him in the night of your afflictions, He will wonderfully comfort you in the

(172) Stud. u. Krit. 1855, p.830.

morning." (173)

"If I wish to get at the truth I must listen to this immediate revelation of God in the heart of every man." (Col.1: 19,20.)

"Some," says Franck, "hold the opinion of Denck, that finally every one will be saved. They conceive of a terrible hell in which the ungodly are tortured in their spirits - for ever - which they consider means a long time." (174) In his last Confession of Faith<sup>(175)</sup> Denck brings his teaching as far as possible into line with that of Oecolampadius, though there is no reason for supposing that he changed his interpretation of 'everlasting' as meaning 'for a long time'; or departed from the significance he attached to the Inner Word - as the Logos - God immanent in every man. He says, "God will give to every one according to his works; to the wicked, everlasting punishment according to his justice; to the good, everlasting life according to his mercy. Not that he owes any man anything if he were to make a strict account with us. But according to His promise He pays us that he has already given. He

(173) Ordnung Gottes.

(174) Hetzerkronik, 464.

(175) Widerruf, Art.4.



has regard to faith and good works, finds delight in them and rewards them: not that they originate with us, but only because we do not receive in vain, nor refuse the grace that is offered us. Everything is from one treasure-house, which is really good, even the Word which was in the beginning with God, and in the last times became flesh. Happy is the man who does not despise the gifts of God."

Denck did not consider the doctrine of the final salvation of "the lost" as ethically defective, or a hindrance to an effective appeal to man. Asked why he could so urgently call men to self-renunciation, when they would all be saved in the end without it, he answered that he would prefer to die a quick death once, rather than suffer a slow death, a thousand times. "Therefore we must live in a Christ-like way, so that we may not afterwards have to wait for salvation, under the torture of a tormenting conscience." (176)

## VI.

### On the CHURCH.

Denck agreed with the 'Anabaptists', so far as they regarded the Church as a spiritual community, an Apostolic Brotherhood. He never aimed at the leadership of any organised Religious Party. During the two years, from May 1525, when he first took an open stand for Spiritual Reform, till his death in December 1527, he pursued purely spiritual ideals. He was engaged in what he called "an embassy for God". He wanted a confederacy of all good men - not a new Sect, but a community which would be a revival of that Brotherhood which, under the name of "The Friends of God", had in the past brought so much peace and blessing. "They are not sectaries," Tauler had said, "who, unlike the friends of the world, call themselves the friends of God." "God is my witness, that I desire that things may go well with me, only for the sake of one Sect, the Communion of the Saints, let it be where it will."<sup>(177)</sup> This was Denck's idea of the Church, "the Communion of

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(177) Letter to Oecolampadius. Keller's Ein Apostel, p.252.

Saints", and he regarded the great ecclesiastical institutions to which admission was given by infant baptism, without a personal confession of faith, as subversive of Christianity.<sup>(178)</sup> Denck stood for the ideal purity of the Church, as a Fellowship of all good men everywhere, and having for its mission the salvation of the individual and of society. He consistently applied to the Church Luther's ideal of the Christian as a spiritual priest. The Church is a fellowship of spiritual priests, of the regenerate only: and its life is regulated, and its discipline maintained, by spiritual means alone, and independent of all external authority. His idea of the Church as a spiritual community, and its freedom from the Civil power, as also his attitude towards the Sacraments, were simply deductions - though the Reformers considered them unjustifiable deductions - from the fundamental principles, held in common by the orthodox Reformers and the men of the Spiritual Reform, viz. the independence of the individual judgment, and especially the supremacy of the personal and subjective element in religion. The Reformed idea of the Church was that of 'a Fellowship of believers,'

(178) Zw. Epp. I. 531. P. Gynoraus reports Denck as teaching that in a way there was properly speaking as yet no Church.

and the marks of that fellowship were, 'the preaching of the Word and the right administration of the Sacraments, the means of grace, by which God reveals Himself to man, and man reveals his faith in God.'<sup>+</sup> But that did not satisfy Denck's ideal of the primitive and apostolic Church which he wished to see restored. The indwelling of the Spirit of God in all the members of the Church was essential in a spiritual community which was in alliance with God. For its mission was to extend the fellowship of the invisible Communion of the Saints, and to gather into one all who were ready for membership in the Brotherhood of the Spirit of God; and thus to purify the life of the individual man and society, in face of the moral anarchy that prevailed in the world. In this view Denck was undoubtedly in harmony with New Testament teaching, and the Pauline conception of the Church as the living Body of Christ in the world, the partly visible, partly invisible expression of the spiritual Christ, and the fellowship of all who live in spiritual union and communion with Him. Love to Christ and the sense of the Real Presence of Christ were the unifying principles of the primitive Church. It was a fellowship of believers in Christ, whose invisible presence bound together the various

+ *Studies in Mystical Religion*. Jones. p. 426

units into one whole. Everywhere in Apostolic times there was the common consciousness of believers that they were possessed by the Holy Spirit, and spiritually equipped and sustained by Him. Every believer was an organ of the Spirit, and had various gifts and powers beyond his own, gifts with which the Spirit had endowed him. The ideal of the Church in the days of the Apostles was unquestionably that of a Spiritual Fellowship of men who, as Paul taught, were partakers of Divine power and heavenly wisdom, sharing in the one Divine life of which all had a part. 'There was no clergy, no laity.'<sup>(179)</sup> "Gifted personalities" exercised the leadership that belongs to distinguished service in a Community where all were spiritual priests, "a fellowship of brothers and equals in the faith". As there were no officials, there was really no organisation. The community circled round 'inspired personalities'. The priesthood of believers and the ministry of "the gifts of the spirit" were living ideas for the first and second generation of Christians, but before the first century ended the appearance of the official ministry, and the growth of ecclesiastical organisation, are evidences of the decline of the primitive

(179) Jones, Studies in Mystical Religion, p.23 ff.

conception of the Apostolic Church. The day of the Apostolic prophet and inspired teacher was nearly ended, though there was a brief revival of the primitive ideal of the Church and Apostolic ministry in the Montanist movement, which deeply impressed the Christian world in the latter part of the second century. The Church in the early days of the faith was 'a community of the inspired,' and, as we see in the New Testament, inspired communications were regarded as part of the ordinary worship of the Church, and the Divine impulse in these messages was not questioned. Montanism and the men of the Spiritual Reform aimed at the restoration and realisation of the Spiritual Church of the New Testament, and its inspired ministry, and sought a way of return to the time before an official priesthood and an ecclesiastical order so changed the spirit and character of the Church, that the spontaneous Christian life, with its ministry of manifold gifts under the influence of the Spirit, had disappeared. Like all individualism, this spiritual conception of the Church was looked on by the orthodox Reformers as a menace to order and good government, and something, having a distinct tendency to anarchy, that had to be repressed. (180)

(180) "I fear two things," said Luther, "epicurism and enthusiasm, two schisms that have still to come." Tischreden.

Crushed in the sixteenth as in the second century, the spirit of the movement persisted and lives on. But as after the Montanist Revival, "the Church more and more provided for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, by practically chaining His influence to the hierarchy and the Sacraments,"<sup>(181)</sup> in like manner, the orthodox Church of the Reformation chained the Spirit's influence to the inspired Scriptures, as interpreted by the orthodox creeds, and maintained by the civil sword, and which became as unbending an authority as the medieval hierarchy had ever been. "Sebastian Franck declared that in the new Lutheran Church there was less freedom of speech and belief than among the Turks and heathens."<sup>(182)</sup> It was the moral and spiritual aspect of the situation, however, more than the theoretical and theological that chiefly concerned men like Denck. They were profoundly disappointed with the moral, social and political results of the Reformation. Luther himself confessed, "The longer we preach the Gospel, the deeper the people plunge into greed, pride and luxury." After three or four years' experience of Augsburg, Rhegius Urbanus threatens to leave the city, its

(181) Rainy, The Ancient Catholic Church, p.139.

(182) The Cambridge Modern History, II. 223.

pride, vain-glory and worldliness having become unbearable. "If things go on like this," said one of the city preachers in 1526, "it would be better to fight one another to the death." The old pre-Reformation laxity remained, the old political tyranny, the old social wrongs. It was the way of thinking in those days to associate morals with belief, and just as Luther had traced all the moral chaos of his time to the errors of Rome, so the Spiritual Reformers found the explanation of the moral and spiritual degeneration of the Reformation age in the doctrinal errors of the Reformed Church. This led Denck, in his quest for a spiritual religion, to challenge the whole scheme of Protestant theology, and to question the validity of the new Church which was being laboriously built on the ruins of the old. It was the low state of morals in cities like Basel, Nürnberg, Augsburg and Strassburg more than anything else, that led him into conflict with the Lutheran and Zwinglian theology which was much in evidence in these cities, and which he reckoned responsible for the moral disorder that prevailed. (183)

(183) Cp. Philip Landgrave of Hesse in a letter to his sister, the Duchess Elizabeth of Saxony, "I find more goodness in those so-called 'Enthusiasts' than in those who are Lutheran." (Kommel Philipp der Grossmüthige III. 40.)  
Capito/



Though Denck was represented as an enemy to Civil government, he repudiated the charge and with justice. Far from seeking to prejudice obedience to the Magistrate, he took pains to point out to any man who held such views the serious consequences to himself. Under Denck's influence Hans Hut, who, according to his own Confession, had been a zealous disciple of Münzer, forswore the teaching of Münzer, and allowed himself to be persuaded from Holy Scripture that obedience must be given to the Magistrate. (184) Denck acknowledged, as Paul did, the rightful place of Civil government in the world. He was an extremist, even among the Anabaptists, in his doctrine of non-resistance. (185) He held with those who believed that they should endure persecution without retaliation. "The Christian," he said, "can neither be

Capito (Commentary on Prophet Hosea 1528) says most of them are 'God-fearing and zealous men whom he regards as the chosen of God, and loves as dear brethren'.

Kessler (Sabbata II. 143) "These people move me to pity. They are so zealous for God, though without knowledge. I grieve to hear of their being broken up and slaughtered with so much misery and violence."

Keller Ein Apostel re pp 14, 15.

(184) H. Hut, Bekenntniss vom 5 Oct. 1527 in Stadt-Archiv. zu Augsburg.

(185) Albrecht Ritschl is right in saying that the Baptist view was that "the Christian should not resist violence but be always ready for suffering." (Geschichte des Pictismus I. 23 ff.)

plaintiff nor judge." (186) While he sympathised with the Peasants' wrongs, Revolution made no appeal to him. At the time of the Augsburg Synod of 1527 the drift had already set in strongly in favour of Social Revolution, and Denck, with his lofty conceptions of the Christian fellowship as existing for the spiritual deliverance of men, laboured to impress on his fellow-workers the wisdom of the better way.

For what doubtless seemed to him good reasons, Denck considered the Magistracy should not be held by Christian men. Probably his main reason was, that in the prevailing order of things every Government required the Magistrate to persecute others for their religious views, and such persecution was to his mind unlawful under any circumstances.

"The Apostles," he says, "diligently teach that Christians must be subject to law, but they do not teach that they should be magistrates, for Paul says 'What have I to do to judge them that are without?' (1 Cor. 5:12). Therefore can no disciple or follower of Christ rule the world." (187) Denck strenuously denied the Civil power any place in the constitution of the Christian Church. As the Communion of Saints it is subject to Christ alone. His position was

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(186) Vom gesetz, 183.

(187) Stud. u. Krit. 1851, p.144.

that "in matters of faith everything must be left free, willing and unforced." (188) It was spiritual freedom for Christian men that was demanded. And neither Luther nor Zwingli would hear of it. They refused to acknowledge the distinction between Civil government and the spiritual freedom of the Church. Three centuries were required to give effect to Denck's ideas in the Reformed Church. His spiritual conception of the Church led him to claim for the Church absolute independence of the State, and absolute immunity from the Civil Sword. And here he immediately came into conflict both with Luther and Zwingli, who looked to the Territorial Princes and the City Councils for effective aid in carrying out their ideas of Reform. So the Civil authority became an instrument of the Church for enforcing its decisions on the consciences of men. To Luther, indeed, ideally the Church was a community of believers, every member of which was a spiritual priest ministering to the spiritual and social well-being of all. "I believe," he says, "that there is on earth wide as the world only one holy Catholic Christian Church which is simply the Community or Assembly of the Saints." (189) But this ideal was not realised.

(188) *Widerruf*, Art.6.

(189) *Sämmlische Werke Erlangen* D.XXII. p.20.

In practice he had no larger conception than that of Territorial Churches under the protection of the Territorial Princes. With the purely spiritual conception of the Church Luther showed little sympathy. He saw that the only alternative to his State Church was a Church of the regenerate, and this he did not desire. "Where they want to go, I am not disposed to follow. God save me from a Church in which are none but the holy." (190) Zwingli had a larger vision than Luther. It is believed he had in view the leadership of a great confederacy of the Reformed Churches, "an Evangelical Empire founded on the ruins of the Roman Empire", that would show a solid front to the Papal power. (191) He sought to make the City Council the centre of authority in the Reformed Church, and it was on this question that in 1525 he came in conflict with a party of Spiritual Reformers at Zurich, who were set on a complete reformation of the Church, and who demanded the recognition of its spiritual independence. They denied the right of the City Council to give decisions on matters that concerned the Church alone. But Zwingli stood for the authority of the Council, and the Council made his suggestions State Laws. In a

(190) Goebel I., p.150.

(191) Camb. Mod. History II., p.335.

pamphlet entitled "Who gives occasion for disturbance" he says, "They want to have a Church, but no government is to protect the preaching of the Gospel by any violent means, or interfere with the freedom even of heretical preachers."

Bucer's opposition to Denck at Strassburg was chiefly aroused, as we have seen, by the menace of his teaching to a Church in close alliance with the State, which with immense labour he had succeeded in establishing there. And indeed by his attitude to the State Church, Denck everywhere awakened opposition. It was clearly enough seen that he was advocating a radically different conception of the Church from anything then known in the world. As against a Church in alliance with the State, and in a way little more than a department of State, he opposed the idea of a Spiritual Church, which was in spirit and life separate from the world, and independent of the world in the exercise of its spiritual functions: the Word of God and His Spirit alone being its supreme standards of authority. The idea of a State divided into two spheres - the Civil and the Spiritual - presented to the minds of the Reformers the break-up of Christendom, with no assurance for the future. They had no use for a Church of this kind,

and in view of the forces of reaction,<sup>(192)</sup> as the spiritual propaganda in favour of it threatened the work of the Reformation, they summoned all the forces at their command and crushed it. Denck, however, was quite consistent in his teaching. For a spiritual society there must be a spiritual government. The only sword, he said, known to the Church for the reformation of offenders, is, after brotherly admonition has failed, the spiritual sword of excommunication which is ethical and dynamical. But the idea was new, and was denounced and resisted by the Reformers. As Keller<sup>(193)</sup> remarks, "While Denck energetically defended the proposition that it was not right for Magistrates to take action against their subjects in matters of faith, both Luther and Zwingli taught that it was the duty of the Civil Magistrate to establish the true faith within their Territorial limits, and to maintain it with the severest penalties." To begin with, however, Luther was against persecuting methods. On 17th June, 1522, writing to Melancthon in regard to the Prophets of Zwickau who were then at Wittenberg, he says: "Take care that our Prince does not stain his hands with

(192) As an example we see Cochlaeus trying to use the disturbances at Worms in 1527 as a means of promoting a Catholic reaction.

(193) Ein Apostel der Wiedertäufer.

the blood of these new prophets." "It is by the aid of the Word alone we must combat; by the Word alone we must conquer ..... No one must be compelled to the faith or to the things of the faith against his will; he must be prevailed upon by faith alone." Luther held that the Anabaptists should not be executed, except when along with religious error they preached sedition (Tischreden 298). But his native conservatism overcame his early desire for spiritual methods of Reform. In his fear lest enthusiasm should fling away all the gains of the Past, he halted and turned back. It may seem to us even now that the Reformers could do nothing else than what they did, if the new Church was to hold out against a wily and inveterate foe. But the dreamers had a greater faith in God, and they might have succeeded, if the Reformed Church itself had not ruthlessly swept them from its path. That Church lacked faith in the conquering power of the Spirit. The Reformers did not venture all on the simple declaration of the truth which finds a response in the human heart. They fell back on official authority, the authority of the Bible, the authority of the State, the Authority of the Church. (194) The centuries, however,

(194) Jones, Mystical Religion, p.34.

have pronounced a verdict for Denck, so far as it is now universally recognised as inconsistent with the Reformation principles of Liberty and Spiritual Priesthood, that a man's belief should be dictated to him by the ancient methods of physical violence and the Civil sword.

Denck's view of the spirituality of the Church determined his attitude towards the Sacraments. Christ calls us to a religion of the Spirit, and Sacraments and Ceremonies having no spiritual significance, are of no importance to the spiritual man, and find no authoritative place in a truly spiritual Christianity. "Ceremonies in themselves are not sinful, but he who thinks he will get anything either from Baptism or the Eucharist is still in superstition."<sup>(195)</sup> He who busies himself too much with ceremonies does not gain much, for even "If all ceremonies were lost, little harm would come of it;"<sup>(196)</sup> and it is better not to have them than abuse them. The great spiritual rule is, "All externals must yield to love, for they are for the sake of love and not love for their sake."<sup>(197)</sup> "He who has this love

(195) Widerruf, Art.7.

(196) " "

(197) Vom gesetz, 188.



(of God) in his heart is free from all ceremonies."

"He who fulfils the law of love fulfils all ceremonies even if he never thinks of them."<sup>(198)</sup> Where you have the reality, you do not require the sign. So sacraments and ceremonies are unnecessary for spiritual men. They are only reminders of the Eternal and Divine things, viz. of the spiritual content of religion, which is love; pictorial representations of truth for those yet unregenerate. They can be dispensed with by the spiritual man. "Christ who is love itself gave no heed to the rites of the old law, and neither commanded nor forbade them. He wished it to be understood that a man can come to love without any rites. To him who has not love, rites are of no use, but he who understands and possesses love will live as Jesus did. Love, then, gives its friends leave to observe or disregard ceremonies, so far as they truly love the Father as His children."<sup>(199)</sup> But "a true friend of God, for the sake of others subjects himself voluntarily to outward ceremonies."<sup>(200)</sup> "The baptism of children is not a Divine but a human command, and therefore a matter of Christian freedom." Baptism is "the bond of a good conscience towards God;" it signifies and

(198) Vom gesetz, 160, 161.

(199) Von der Wahren liebe.

(200) Bullinger, 37<sup>b</sup>.

attests that we have come out of the world, and are resolved henceforth to walk in purity of life (von der Wahren liebe). But "It harms no faithful man to have been baptised in his childhood; and God asks no other baptism so long, as he observes the order which becomes a Christian Community, and if he does not do that, I do not know what God will do." (201)

According to Franck, (Chronica III. 390) Denck in the end dissuaded people from being re-baptised. He felt it needed a command and a vocation which he doubted he ever had, and expressed the wish that he had never baptised any one. "Let every one see to it that he does not serve before he is hired, for he who is not called and sent to teach baptism undertakes a vain task. Therefore I wish, if God permit, to leave baptism alone for ever, if I have no other call from the Lord than that I have had till now. What I have done is done, but what I shall do will hurt no man. Zeal for the house of God sent me out, and now again has my heart called me home." A Christian community, he held, did not need the outward badge of Baptism, and ought to be able to maintain its purity by spiritual discipline alone.

The Eucharist is a sign of remembrance of the

(201) Widderruf, Art. 7.

love of God which has emptied itself and communicated itself, and likewise of the duty of man to deny himself in love, and sacrifice himself to God. "The children of God should keep before their eyes the first-born Son who wore our nature. As He for our sake became bread that is broken for us and strengthens us, so we should be ready to be bread, and to be broken for one another. By the Eucharist we remind ourselves of that." (202) Or again it is a sign of remembrance of Christ, in whom both the love of God and the sacrificing love of man have been represented, and who has therefore realised the unity of God and man for the first time and in a complete way. "It is a symbol of the union of God and man, in which the offering becomes perfect and the love one, (God laying aside his Divinity and man laying aside his humanity), as happened with Jesus Christ the first-born Son of God, and as is still seen in all the Elect." (203)

How different this teaching is from that of the Lutheran Church is evident. Luther no doubt began

(202) Von der Wahren liebe.

(203) Vom gesetz, 188. This is a deeper view of the Eucharist than that of the 'Anabaptists' who looked on the Eucharist merely as a sign of Brotherhood (Bullinger, 40<sup>b</sup>).

by representing the Sacraments as having only a subjective value, and of significance to faith alone. He got this view from Tauler, as Tauler in turn got it from Eckhart. "It was a commonplace of thought with the mystics that baptism could not cleanse the soul nor the Eucharist sustain it, for we owe the purity and life of the soul to the indwelling Spirit of God alone." The Sacraments at first were to Luther pictorial and symbolic ways of teaching the grace and forgiveness of God. But the truth he so clearly perceived by the vision of faith was lost sight of in later years. Medievalism asserted itself, and his natural conservatism led him to impose on the Reformed Church a crude and unintelligible theory of the Eucharist, repellent to the enlightened mind, and the spiritual consciousness of men.

It is certain that both Luther and Zwingli were influenced in their adherence to infant baptism by their conception of the State Church. (204) They saw as clearly as their opponents did what the retention of infant baptism at that time implied, and what its denial would involve. Both were inconsistent in

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(204) From the religious point of view Luther is curiously in touch with modern psychology when in answer to the Anabaptists he says: "How do they know children do not believe? Faith is not always active, as for instance when we are asleep. Faith may exist in a child and yet be dormant."

the way they dealt with the question. They began by laying down the principle of retaining in the Church only what the Bible commanded, and on this principle the Fathers, the Councils and Tradition had been forced to yield to the authority of the Written Word. But in the stress of controversy, and finding no express sanction for infant baptism in the Scriptures, Luther was compelled to change his position. He saw it was impossible in this instance to be consistent with his original principle regarding Scriptural authority and direct command, if he were to maintain his idea of the State Church. To part with infant baptism in favour of baptism on profession of faith would destroy that Church, and leave instead a Spiritual Church of the regenerate. And in order to hold to infant baptism for the safeguarding of the State Church, he had to change his principle into that of retaining what the Scriptures did not forbid: a fatal principle for the whole Reformed position, for the Romanists could defend on the same principle the crudest superstition, which is not expressly and positively forbidden in Scripture.

In the same way Zwingli had to find a way out of the difficulty by practically identifying baptism

with circumcision in the Old Testament Church. Oecolampadius indeed would have preferred, but for the difficulty of the situation, to postpone baptism to the third year.<sup>(205)</sup> In a letter to Zwingli (22nd August 1527)<sup>(206)</sup> regarding the case of M. Cellarius he said, "We have never dared to teach infant baptism as a command, but rather as an instinct of charity." As Dorner, however, has pointed out, "Zwingli saw that the setting aside of infant baptism was the same as setting aside the National Church, exchanging a hitherto National Reformation of the Church for one more or less Donatist. For if infant baptism were given up because faith was not yet there, there only remained as the right time for it the moment when living faith and regeneration were certain. And then baptism would become the sign of fellowship of the regenerate, the saints who bind themselves together as atoms out of the world."<sup>(207)</sup> As for Luther's doctrine of the Sacraments, it was in complete antagonism with his own earlier conviction of their significance. Nothing could show the breach in his thinking more clearly than his words in 1525 on the Sacraments. "Outward things in

(205) Herzog, II. 81.

(206) " " 192 ff.

(207) History of Prot. Theol. p.294.

religion must precede inward experiences which are mediated by outward things, for God has resolved to give no one the inward gifts except through the outward things. He will give no one the spirit and faith without the use of outward word and sign."<sup>(208)</sup> So infant baptism became the 'opus operatum' of regeneration, and in the Eucharist was found the supernatural and real presence of Christ.

The actual question at issue as between orthodox and Spiritual Reformer was what kind of Church was to be put in the place of the Medieval Church. The radical wing insisted on a Church of the Apostolic type, and both Luther and Zwingli resisted them. The pure Church as the Fellowship of Saints, its members those alone with an experience of Christian faith, and free from all questionable alliances with the world, seemed to them the unpractical dream of visionaries. And this at any rate was the case. The orthodox Reformers compromised and succeeded: the Spiritual Reformers persisted in their ideals and failed. "The Reformers with the power of restraint and gifts of statesmanship to see what would work and would not work in the world of their day, became

(208) Wider die himlichen Propheten vom sacrament  
II. anno 1525 unter.

the leaders of the Protestant Reformation.....

Those who had the vision and were determined to make the world fit the vision with no compromise risked everything for the cause they believed in, flung out ideals which have been guiding stars ever since, went to death in terrible fashion and fell on almost total obscurity." (209)

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## CRITIQUE.

Hans Denck was a new and original interpreter of the Christian Religion. As a pioneer thinker, it is not surprising that his conception of spiritual religion should be somewhat lacking in definiteness, and have the appearance of being one-sided and incomplete. Towards the historical element in the Christian religion it might seem as if he were unduly indifferent, because of an exaggerated Idealism. The self-unfolding of God has come chiefly, if not exclusively, in History, and the Person and Work of Christ may justly be considered the crowning historical revelation of God, which takes precedence of all other revelations outward or inward. The general incarnation of the Logos in Humanity, on which Denck lays so much emphasis, is not adequate to the demands made on it. The Inner Word has not proved in experience to be ethically powerful enough, without the re-inforcement of the Outer Word in the Christ of History. The light of nature has not been able to overcome the darkness of ignorance and error. And there is the need for the unique Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, for the enlightenment of the mind, and the imparting of the spiritual impulse, which quickens the latent power within, waiting to be called into activity on the side of obedience to the

Divine Will. Jesus Christ is the true Light - the Light in its fulness and life-giving power, and "without me," said Jesus, "ye can do nothing."

(Jn.15:5) Denck, through insufficient emphasis on that fact, gives the impression that the Logos incarnate in humanity is in some way of more importance than the Logos incarnate in Jesus Christ. This was an error. It has been the breaking forth of the Eternal love and grace in Jesus Christ that has most powerfully awakened man, first to the consciousness of his discord with God, and then to the need of harmony with Him, and finally to the discovery of the way by which that harmony is to be attained. The Christ within needs the call of the Christ without to become conscious of itself. The general revelation which is shared in by Humanity as a whole has come to remarkable fruition in the great Ethnic religions, but they are all defective in precisely the one thing that the Christian religion provides - the perfect historical unfolding of God in Christ. That may be regarded as the climax of the general Incarnation of God in Humanity, and it is unique and necessary for Redemption. This was clearly recognised by the Apostles, as when Peter said "There is none other name under Heaven given among men whereby we must be

saved" (Acts 4:12). And again when Paul declared to the Athenians, "Whom ye worship in ignorance, Him set I forth unto you" (Acts 17:23). The Idealism which neglects the significance of the historical Christ is unmindful of the defects of the Ethnic Religions: and that it is the historical manifestation of God in Christ which has given to Christianity its peculiar distinction and power. It may be true as Denck says that the immanent God - the incarnate Logos - is in every man, but history witnesses to the inadequacy of this alone to enable man to attain unity with God, and so to realise his destiny. The light of Nature, the Voice of God, the Power of the Highest in Humanity, the Christ within - call it what you will - seeks to reveal itself, but the call of the historical Christ is essential to enable the Christ within to become conscious of Himself, and to endue Him with redeeming power. It was in the historical Christ that the Unity of God with man was fully revealed in a life of perfect obedience to the will of God, and it has been through that historical revelation that man has been enabled to give obedience to God, which, as Denck says, is essential freedom. While it is doubtless true that God can save men without means, and independently of Scripture or

preaching, that cannot be regarded as a normal experience. The testimony of the Outer Word, whether in Scripture or in preaching, is the ordinary method by which God brings men into harmony with Himself, and in Christ is the Righteousness, the Wisdom and the Power of God. But the immanence of the Divine in man is necessary for the effective working of the perfect self-unfolding of God, and His redemptive grace revealed in Jesus Christ. Christ is Ideal, but He is also Real, and the surer we are of His reality, the surer we are of the reality of the Voice within, and the ideals of God, and the service of God to which the Inner Word calls us. The witnesses agree, but the witness of the historical Jesus is clearest and most convincing. The glory of God is seen in the Face of Jesus Christ, and through Jesus Christ we become convinced of His redeeming Love and Power. In Him there is no conflict of opposing interests, as in ourselves: no confusing of the issue by sin and unbelief. He is the perfect manifestation of the stainless purity and boundless love of God. What is seen dimly in man is clearly revealed in Jesus Christ. And He is infinitely more than mere example however potent and persuasive. Example is not the same as power, and from the Person

of the historical Christ power goes forth. It is the power of the Highest without that comes to the re-inforcement of the power of the Highest within, and so overcomes all hostility and breaks every barrier down. The modern Idealistic Theologies reveal the same defect as we find in Denck. There is insufficient recognition of the place of the historical revelation in Religion, and there is a want of perception of the fact, that the Idealism on which so much reliance is placed is very largely the outcome of the historical unfolding of God in Christ. In Him the Divine Word, the Eternal Thought, which is expressed in manifold ways in Nature, became incarnate in one unique Divinely human Person, who possesses in Himself that redemptive power in its completeness which Denck found in measure in every man. It is in every man, but in Jesus Christ the redemptive power of the Love of God is supreme. The common idea of the influence of the Spirit of God is that of an invasion from without: Denck's idea was that of an outbreak from within. But it is both. God is immanent: He is also transcendent. The power is everywhere. It is within. It is without. But it is as the power breaks in on us from without that it liberates the power within. God speaks and the

Divine within us hears. He calls and the Christ within us answers. It is true, as Denck says, that the Inner Word is of profound significance. If God had no advocate within, He would for ever appeal in vain. But as history shows, the slumbering divinity waits to be roused by the call of Christ, and in the moment of awakening, Divine power is released. The presentment of this fact may have been indistinct in Denck's teaching, but in his deepest thought Jesus Christ was the historical unfolding of God - the Divine Logos Himself incarnate in a Divine-Human Person. Jesus Christ was not a mere Ideal, but a historical Person whose word to him was Divine Law, and whose life for him was the most compelling influence he knew. Denck's theology - expressed though it might be in simple and popular language, and without any attempt at theological or philosophical form - was Christo-centric: and his identification of the Inner Word with the Eternal Logos, who became incarnate in Jesus Christ, saved him from an Idealism that could dispense with the historical Revelation. Although the idea is not worked out in detail in the few brief tracts that have come down to us, there is no reason to doubt that it was the historical Christ he proclaimed as the perfect out-

ward expression of the Voice of God within, and who was the impelling force that brought man to unity with God. It is indeed hardly possible to think of God as outside of us. As Paul quotes from Aratus with approval - "In Him we live and move and have our being". And the inner and the outer word are simply different expressions for the same thing. They are in reality both inner words, in the sense that both are spiritual. While the historical manifestation of God in Christ appears external, as Paul reminds us Christ is the head over all things to the Church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all (Eph.1:23). The externality, therefore, is more in appearance than in reality. And the historical Christ is the visible word which otherwise is invisible in every man. That Denck believed in the uniqueness of Christ's Incarnation is unquestionable. He believed that Christ obeyed the law with a completeness unknown before, and while he taught that the man who has attained to unity with God should live as Christ lived, he recognised that the sinlessness which he claimed for regenerate man is not absolute like Christ's, but only relative. And even that is explained by 'the power of the Highest' within every man. Denck had made the discovery

of the immanence of God and he was tempted to over-emphasise it, to the detriment it may be of the thought of the transcendence of God. It was a defect probably inevitable to a discovery of such stupendous significance. But the transcendence of God demands recognition, and the transcendent manifestation of the Divine Being is seen in Jesus Christ, who is distinguished from the Humanity with which he is yet identified, as the 'express image of His Person', the visible of the invisible God.

As regards the source of authority in religion, the centuries have brought us appreciably nearer the standpoint of Denck than that of Luther and the orthodox Reformers.<sup>†</sup> It has become increasingly more evident that Revelation is wider than Inspiration, and while Revelation is objective - the self-unfolding of God - in the world and history and religious experience, Inspiration is subjective, the discovery and expression of the significance of that objective self-unfolding of God. Apart from Revelation in Nature, History and Experience, there would be nothing to discover or interpret - there could be no

† D.S. Adam, *The Cardinal Elements of the Christian Faith* Note A.  
H.H. Wendt, *The Idea & Reality of Revelation*



spiritual enlightenment, no inspiration. But again without the spiritual enlightenment which gives spiritual discernment, the Revelation would be valueless, and thus the enlightened interpretation must be regarded as an essential part of the complete Revelation. Revelation and Inspiration, then, are the objective and subjective sides of one and the same thing - the self-unfolding of God. There may be different degrees of inspiration, but without it there can be no appreciation of the Revelation of God in Nature, History and Experience. The objective self-manifestation of God, however, comes first; and the unique distinction of Christianity is that in Jesus Christ is the highest self-unfolding of God in history, and in the Scriptures there is the classic interpretation of that self-unfolding given by men who, through their close relation to Christ in his Revelation of God during his life on earth, were specially illumined or inspired to understand and interpret that highest self-manifestation of God. They walked in the light and reflected the light of God. The fact of Christ - the historical Jesus - is the central manifestation of God, and all other manifestations of God in Nature, History and Experience have to be related to Christ in order to find

Is not then  
the sweeping  
Is not the  
manifestation of God  
in Christ central to the  
entire Christian faith?

their true meaning and interpretation. The Scriptures, as the classic interpretation of the supreme revelation by those nearest to the historic manifestation, rightly take their place as the subjective side of the historical unfolding of God in Christ. But in a similar way the history of the Church in all ages, and of Christian men everywhere who have experience of the redeeming power of Christ, and the influence of His Spirit, have a right to be included as a subordinate part of that historical unfolding of God in Christ. These subjective experiences, however, have given and can give no new content to the essential revelation of God in Christ. All they can do is to interpret the Revelation once given. The value of the Scriptures is found in this. They are the chief source of our knowledge of the fact of Revelation, and the nature of the self-unfolding of God in Christ, and they are the classic testimony to the Fact of Christ and his Redemption, expressed in the experience and teaching of Apostolic men. Scripture, however, is not to be identified with Revelation, which is the objective self-unfolding of God in fact and experience. It is of value as the enlightened interpretation, and expression in human speech of this objective historical self-

*not then  
scripture?*

unfolding of God in Christ, and of its immediate redemptive results in human experience.

The Reformed conception of Revelation identified it with Scripture, which was thought of as a supernaturally imparted teaching. It was unique and final, as the Divinely inspired record and interpretation of Christ. All that is possible for men now is by prayer and study of the Scriptures, with the aid of the continual enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, which is necessary for the right understanding of the truth therein revealed, to discover the mind of Christ expressed in the Scriptures, for God no longer speaks to man direct. The Reformers held not only that no new truth could be added to the content of the Revelation, but also that no other interpretation could be true than that given by the inspired writers. But it is only in interpretation that progress can be made, for while in John's Gospel we have the plain intimation given of the continuity of Revelation, it is limited to the fuller discovery of the Mind of Christ (John XVI: 13, 14). Nothing undeed can be added to the content of the Revelation which is complete in Christ. He is the Alpha and the Omega of the Revelation given in the fulness of time. The Christ of History, and the interpretation of Him in

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the Scriptures as a guide for further thought, must be the groundwork of all progressive understanding of the Mind and Will of God. The authority of the scriptural interpretation of the self-unfolding of God in Christ finds its witness in the Holy Spirit within. The writers of Scripture, throbbing with the life of the spirit, described and interpreted the Divine revelation in Christ, which was the objective manifestation of the same Spirit which now witnesses in men. Their inspiration consists in the sufficiency of their description of the facts, and the correctness of their estimate of the spiritual significance of the facts. But the Revelation is wider and fuller than the scriptural delineation of it, which at the same time is a real if subordinate part of the Revelation. The authority of Scripture, then, is found first in the self-unfolding of God in Christ it describes, and secondly in the spiritual illumination under whose influence it was written. The ultimate and primary Word of God is Christ, the Logos historically manifested, and who is the Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. The Scriptures derive their authority from the fidelity with which the writers under the impulse of the Spirit of Christ describe, and bring within our

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reach that Revelation of God which was given in Jesus Christ, with its spiritual significance and redeeming power.

Jesus Christ, then, is the ultimate and primary Word of God, and not only the writers of Scripture, but every Christian man in whom the Spirit of Christ dwells is a true witness to the Revelation, and he interprets the Revelation by his own experience of Christ. And just as the Scriptures mediate that self-unfolding of God with all its spiritual significance in human experience to men, so in a very real sense does every believer in Christ who has the witness of the Spirit of the living Christ within. Thus it is the witness of the Spirit in our souls, and not anything external to ourselves, that convinces us of the inspiration and authoritative value of the Scriptures. The Spirit bears witness with our Spirits that they are a true unveiling of the significance of the Word of God in Christ. The inspiration and authority of Scripture for us is found primarily in the delivery of the Fact of the self-unfolding of God in Christ, and secondarily in the Christian experience of the writers who were dominated by the Spirit of Christ, and who have mediated to us their knowledge and understanding and have given to us

their interpretation of the Divine self-manifestation in Christ. It becomes evident, then, how much nearer we are to-day to the position of Denck and the Religion of the Spirit, than we are to the old Reformation theological standpoint.

In the view of Denck and the Spiritual Reformers, the voice of the Spirit in the heart of the believing man was regarded as equally authoritative with that of the written Word. It was the highest standard in things spiritual and took precedence even of the letter of Scripture, which the Reformed theology taught was not only authoritative but final. The Scriptures, they held, were only a re-affirmation of what had already been revealed to the soul by the Inner Word. Those strong and deep convictions which had led them into a vital relationship with God, and which gave them such irrefragable evidence and assurance of reality as made them proof against every adversary, were, they believed, inwrought by the Spirit of God, and as clear and undeniable revelations as any in the written Word. The revelation of the Spirit to the individual, however, did not and could not contradict the outward Word rightly understood and spiritually interpreted, though sometimes exaggerated statements might be made that this revelation

of the Word in experience made them practically independent of the Written Word. The general tendency, however, was not towards the depreciation of the Written Word, but rather its exaltation. They threw themselves even more unreservedly on the teaching of the Written Word than the orthodox Reformers did. Their social ideals were based on what they found depicted in glowing colours in the Holy Scriptures. If their doctrines seemed revolutionary, they were essentially doctrines they had drawn from the fountainhead of Scripture itself. They believed<sup>†</sup> utterly in the Written Word in its delineation of the Kingdom of God as realizable in this world, and in its teaching about the Brotherhood of man. It was their enthusiasm for the social and religious ideals of the Scriptures that more than anything else made them radical Reformers, and led some of them into the extravagances which awakened hostility, and ended in their persecution as men holding dangerous views which were a menace to the stability of society.

Denck and the Spiritual Reformers emphasised the reality of the intuitions of the mind concerning God, and the service required by God. These they regarded as the direct result of Divine inspiration. And in this they were undoubtedly in line with the

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† See R. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries*.

writers of the Old Testament who evidently thought of man as entering the world equipped with the knowledge of God, and "not only a bare knowledge of Him, but having around it a certain circle of ideas about Him." They thus set great store on "the light that lighteneth every man." The Prophets felt that they recognised, in the world and in history, God whom they already knew. And this knowledge came by revelation. "God spoke and man heard. God revealed Himself, and man recognised Him."<sup>(210)</sup> In the Christian experience there is a more abundant inflow of the Spirit, and believing men had a right to expect, as the result of the self-unfolding of God in Christ, an enlarged gift of illumination and spiritual insight. And it is an undoubted fact that in the first days of the Church every believer was thought of as the recipient of the Spirit, and the inspired utterances of humble Christian men were heard with respect and reverence in the early Christian Assemblies. The gift of the Spirit which led men to utter inspired messages from God was recognised by the early Christian Church. "Jesus sought to kindle independent religious life, and He did kindle it. Yes, that is His peculiar greatness, that He led men to God so

(210) Hastings' Bible Dictionary, Art. God.



that they lived their own life with Him." (211)

And the question of religious experience is paramount in primitive Christianity. In the New Testament we have the record of "an immediate and first-hand experience .... initiation into the Divine secret." (212) The Church is a mystical fellowship of those who have discovered the fact of God's self-unfolding in Christ. To Peter who first made the discovery of the Divine Spirit in the human Jesus, it was said, "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father who is in Heaven." The final authority then is within the soul which discovers and recognises in Christ the Word of God. For the Apostle Paul the Christ within is the source of the Divine life of men. He makes all things new, endues with spiritual power, illumines the soul, and is the earnest of a glory yet to be revealed. In a striking sentence he obliterates the distinction between Divine and human, between man and God, when he says, "He who is joined unto the Lord is one Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17).

That Denck and his fellow-reformers of the School of the Spirit had a deeper insight into this

(211) Das Wesen des Christenthums. Harnack, p.7.

Quoted by R. Jones, *Mystical Religion*.

(212) Studies in Mystical Religion, R. Jones, p.5, Note.

truth than the orthodox theologians can hardly be doubted. The Bible, Denck taught, is not the author of the spiritual and religious convictions of men, because the Bible assumes them and appeals to them. These spiritual intuitions, therefore, are a real part of the Word of God. "The inner witness which God by His grace plants in the soul" is the primary authority. The Scriptures give evidence of their inspiration when they are able to speak in a convincing way to this inner word. The order of things, therefore, established by the orthodox Reformers is completely reversed. With the Reformers, the Spirit within was the corroboration of the Divine inspiration and authority of the Written Word. With Denck, the Written Word was the corroboration of the Divine inspiration and authority of the Word within. The Bible is "an echo of what is uttered deep in my own heart". "It is the light and guide on the way of faith, and without it the best of us would stumble and go astray, but it is not the primary Word of God." The 'Inner Word' to which the 'Outer Word' so exactly corresponds is "a spark of the Divine Spirit", and it is the last court of appeal. But for the inner Word no man would either seek God or find Him, and "without this inner Word

as his guide no one could find God even in the Bible." (213)

Here are two carefully balanced judgments on the teaching of which Denck was so distinguished an exponent. "The Anabaptists, beginning with the Prophets of Zwickau, had imperfectly and half consciously grasped the principle of the continuity of Revelation, and were coming to see that Revelation as recorded in Scripture, and the results of present religious experience, were different phases of one and the same phenomenon ..... It was a first feeble attempt to work out that problem of the basis of Scriptural authority which the Reformers systematically neglected," and to reach "a deeper and more spiritual theory of inspiration than any which is indicated in the works of the orthodox Reformers." (214)

"The School of the Spirit ..... had the merit of perceiving certain facts, and of taking seriously certain truths to which full justice was not done by orthodox Protestantism. It was right in its explicit affirmation that the one absolute authority is God or the Holy Spirit. It also made the just

(213) Denck's Nürnberg Statement. Keller Ein Apostel der Wiedertäufer, pp.49-62.

(214) Hibbert Lectures, 1883. Beard, pp.189-191.

observation that Christianity is not a religion of the letter, conveying to us in a book, a code of elaborated doctrines which it is the sole business of theology to reproduce, and also a collection of Divine enactments which form guidance in the form of proof texts for most of the capital questions dealt with in Church and State, and in the various relationships of the individual life. It took its own way of expressing the fact that the Christian Revelation has imposed grave responsibilities upon the Christian mind in the way of thinking out its intellectual contents, and also of applying its ethical principles to the different spheres of human activity." (215)

The doctrine of Free-Will, expounded by Denck, as opposed to the Determinism of the Reformed Theology, has everywhere prevailed, and the most severely Calvinistic Creeds have had to find a place for it, and while Determinism cannot be excluded from theological and philosophical thought, it must be the Determinism of omnipotent Love rather than the Determinism of omnipotent Force. There is constraint,

but it can be resisted and thwarted. 'The power of the Highest' does not compel, says Denck, though it constrains. There is a sphere of freedom within the larger sphere of Determinism. Denck rightly asserts that we are conscious of this. And the idea of Personality demands it. Only thus can there be personal responsibility, and this is essential for any worthy conception of religion, and for any adequate conception of God and man. The appeal of the Christian religion presupposes it. Part of man's divine inheritance is his freedom of choice. In this he knows himself to be kin with God. To deny the gifts God has bestowed, as Denck suggests, is a wrong done to ourselves. In Jesus Christ the omnipotence of Love is revealed, and it carries with it the assurance of good-will to man, for there is no power greater than and no regenerative influence comparable to that of Love. Its appeal is more forcible than any command, and its constraint is the most compelling influence that can be exercised on man. This is the power of the Incarnate Christ. By many symbols in religion, some of them crude and almost barbaric in their suggestion, the thought of the redemptive power of Divine Love is shadowed forth, and in many diverse ways the Love of God unfolded in

Christ reaches and wins man to the love and service of the Highest. But there is no rude force, no irresistible compulsion which does violence to personality. In the realm of the Spirit, the influence of spirit on spirit is that of equals, and God cannot take from man what is essential to his nature as man. Freedom is inherent in Humanity. Humanism performed a memorable service when it affirmed the equality and freedom of man within the realm of the spirit. Within this realm man moves on a higher plane of thought and feeling and will than on the lower plane of the material life, where hindering circumstances, and an unfriendly environment, threaten to deprive him of his freedom. It is always possible, however, as Denck has shown, for the Spirit to overcome these limitations and assert its freedom. Over the weakness of the flesh the Spirit prevails, and as the history of Humanity has shown, the spirit of man cannot be bound by the strongest material forces, but successfully defies and resists powers that cannot reach the indomitable soul. Personality has justified its claim to Freedom.

The revised eschatology of Denck is remarkable, and at least shows a worthier and more spiritual conception of God and man than that revealed in the orthodox theologies. The question of physical Resurrection, and the idea of the future indissolubly bound up with that conception, simply does not enter into Denck's thought. It is not difficult to harmonise his teaching with the idea of a spiritual body which survives death and enters the world of the Spirit. And as it is the spirit of man that lives, and manifests itself in the material world, and through the material body, it is this spirit that persists and manifests itself through the spiritual body in the life beyond. Denck's idea of the love of God which cannot fail, and of the cleansing fires that purge away the dross of the soul's life amidst material things, makes a strong appeal to the humanitarian instincts which have found expression in every age. An eschatology, which is not the eschatology of the orthodox creeds, has supplanted the latter in the minds of men. Even as expressive symbols of spiritual reality, the older statements regarding the last things cannot but be regarded as defective. The essential spiritual truths embodied in the orthodox conceptions of heaven and hell would be re-

inforced by a loftier conception of their contents. How far Denck has gone in the right direction it is difficult to say, and it may be impossible for theology to advance much further in the formulation of ideas regarding what is so vague and uncertain.

The facts of the redemptive love of God, of the inevitableness of retribution, and of the progression of the soul by free assent to the constraining influence of the grace of God, are essential elements in religion. But the way in which life keeps on becoming in the realm of the Spirit, and what influence death has on character and man's attitude to God, we cannot discover without further revelation. Jesus left the future deliberately vague. Ideas of its spirituality, beauty, fellowship, peace, satisfaction are suggested in the Scriptures, but there is a marked absence of detail. Probably because no language could possibly convey to us right thoughts of a life so profoundly different from that of which we have any knowledge or experience. Even at the best, nothing more than pictures and symbols could be given us, pictures and symbols which must fail because of the inadequacy of language, in the absence of experience, to convey any true conception of the realities of the World of the Spirit. Meanwhile



the great principles of Spiritual Religion, verified in experience, are partially but sufficiently known, to enable us to reach forward to a true life of the Spirit which shall be more fully realised hereafter. That the two planes touch and intermingle is conceivable. While the grosser material world cannot influence the world of the Spirit, the spiritual elements in both worlds may act and react on one another. We have no difficulty in imagining that the powers of the Spirit world are with us, and that the world is being guided to its goal by the ministry of kindred spirits. And in the Spirit world itself, we can readily believe that the same helpfulness is shown to imperfectly developed spirits, so that the World of the Spirit is not a closed record but a constantly unfolding volume of surpassing interest and unbounded hope. It is in accordance with the spiritual conception of religion that no limits should be set to the Love and Grace of God, and to the regenerative awakening of forces that are the inalienable heritage of man. If, as Denck says, there is a spark of God in every man, he can never be left wholly in the darkness, and there is deep suggestiveness in Psalm 139. Man may seem to shut God out; he has only shut God in with himself. He

cannot escape from self and therefore he cannot escape from God. In that there is the promise of an eternal hope.

And Denck was right in his thought that the call to renunciation would not lose its reasonableness or efficacy, if the more spiritual view of the future were presented to men. It is not much encouragement to continue in hostility to the Divine Will, to know that the expiation must be made, the reconciliation effected with infinite toil and pain, which might be won now through acceptance of the proffered Grace of God in Christ. Peace with God must be won, and the advocate for God in the Inner or the Outer Word has a strong argument for immediate response to the call of God, before the most favoured time passes, and nothing remains but the stern retribution - redemptive though it may be - of the gnawing worm and the remorseless flame. In this Denck's argument was unanswerable: "Better have a quick death once, than a thousand slow deaths amidst the agonies of a tormenting conscience". The sense of justice in man requires wrong to be righted. And in this the voice of man is the voice of God. In a spiritual world the rewards and penalties can only be spiritual and they are inevitable. In a material world the spirit

can master the material torments that assail it. The history of martyrdom proves that the most frightful and agonising experiences have left the Spirit free and even exultant in God.

The influence of physical penalties on men, then, depends finally on the state of the soul, and even the sufferings of a material hell would have no significance for a soul in communion with God. Hell itself would be converted by the Spirit into heaven. Whatever the rewards and penalties of the future may be, therefore, they must be spiritual, and in the Religion of the Spirit the appeal to the soul can never be imagined as losing its power; for it is within - in the realm of Personality - that man is right or wrong, saved or lost. In the unity of the spirit of man with the spirit of God lies the way of life - as Denck puts it, the road to the eternal mansions. It seems hard to believe that there is no ultimate unity for the God of the universe - God immanent and God transcendent.

Denck's Idealism certainly leads to indistinctness of expression in his conception of the Christian Redemption. His opposition to what he regarded as

the artificiality and externality of the Reformed dogma of Justification led him to recoil too far in his view of the altogether inwardness of Salvation. He fails to recognise, or at least to express clearly, that in God's method of unfolding Himself in history, He came to perfect self-expression in the God-Man Christ, and so in and through Him completed the work of Redemption foreshadowed in the general incarnation of God in humanity and the world.

Denck finds all that is attributed by the Reformed Theology to the justification, sanctification and redemption wrought out by Jesus Christ in man himself. That may be so, and yet because of man's spiritual inability to realise himself and achieve his destiny, the perfect revelation and the completed work of Jesus Christ have become necessary. Jesus Christ is made unto us justification, sanctification and redemption. He discovers Himself to us: He discovers us to ourselves. Man rises to the consciousness first of defeat, and then of victory through Him. By faith in the historic Jesus, unity with God is attained, and there is nothing unreal or artificial about it. It is simply that we discover in its completeness, in Christ, the redemptive power of God that has always been in us: and in reliance on

the perfect, the less powerful spiritual forces within rise into consciousness, and open the door for the inflow of Divine Grace and Love. There is no real question of outer or inner, for 'Christ is all and in all'. The complete harmony between the inner and the outer Word of God is seen in St. Paul. "I live yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." (Gals.2:20)

Faith is the discovery of God in Christ, and at the same time in ourselves. It is the revelation of power without and within: of Christ in outward manifestation and of Christ in the heart. Denck is right in saying that only as Christ is found within can He be truly found without. Every truth about him is verified in experience, because it was already there. He who was from the beginning in man could not bring a new revelation to man. It could only be a fuller presentation of the old. "Christianity is as old as the creation." So Paul speaks of the time when "it pleased God to reveal His Son in me" (Gal.1:15,16). The voice without speaks to the voice within, and the spirit of the historical Word in Jesus Christ calls to the incarnate word in man.

In this sense there is no co-operation between man and God in Redemption, for as Denck conceives it, the co-operation is not between God and man thought of as distinct entities, but between the incarnate Logos within and the incarnate Logos in Christ. This can be said for Denck's view, that in finding the whole redemptive history of love, and suffering, and expiation unfolded in the interior man, he removes its apparent externality and artificiality, when considered apart from the history of the race, and the incarnation of God in Humanity. He sees, as indeed the Apostolic writers did, the world-history of Redemption expressed in Jesus Christ. In all Jesus did and suffered, He was the spoken Word of God, but not a new Word, for in God everything is eternally old, and "The Lamb of God is slain from the foundation of the world". The redemptive process, therefore, is eternal, and in Jesus Christ there is an exposition in human form and language of what has always been the Divine method of Redemption; salvation by the appeal of suffering Love - which goes on suffering and appealing, in the assurance that it will in the end overcome all the sinful works of darkness, and liberate the souls of men.

There is thus a Divine Purpose of Redemption, eternal and sure as God Himself; but it works in such a way as to leave man his freedom, even at the risk of abuse of the tremendous power of Free-Will. The constraining influence of the Divine mind is purely spiritual, and works only in spiritual ways and by spiritual means. All ideas of irresistible force, according to Denck, in the region of the Spirit must be excluded, for such force would defeat itself. Spirit cannot be coerced. It is free, and though impelled to certain courses by stress of circumstances beyond its control, it remains undominated by them. Nothing can imprison the spirit of man against its will. And in this we have a witness to the Divineness of the spirit of man, who is fashioned in the image of God. For that reason Denck repudiated the Reformed doctrine of Election and Reprobation, as expressive of the Eternal Purpose. Events may be divinely ordained which profoundly influence the mind and condition the conduct of men, but the kingdom of the spirit retains its independence whatever happens. Election and Reprobation in the orthodox sense would imply a wrong done to the spirit of man, if God first shut up all men in sin, and then, while he saved some by irresistible grace,

left all others in the bondage of evil. But even in the commission of sin, which is the result of freedom, God respects human personality. Doubtless He wills that all men should be saved, but every effort put forth to that end must have respect to the divine power of free-will with which man as man is endowed. He is great even in his sinning, for it is the assertion of a divine power. He is greatest in ceasing to sin, for, then, he asserts not only his freedom, but declares his consciousness that this freedom is the evidence of his kinship with God, when he turns from the works of darkness to the obedience of the Divine Will. In the non-moral world God may be absolutely arbitrary, and there He can mould and direct the outward fashion of history by direct acts of power, but everything finally rests with the spirit of man - good or evil - and the working out of the Divine purpose, while aided by manifold external adjustments in the physical order and the non-moral world, is ultimately dependent on the free response of the Spirit of man to the call of the Spirit of God. And we can say of God what cannot be said of man. There is no undue influence. Even when men seek to influence others only by the power of suasion, there are many ways of impressing them that



are doubtful and wrong. The pressure is unfair and unjust: the nature of the appeal is destructive of freedom. But in the achievement of the Divine and Eternal Purpose in Redemption, there is no undue constraint, no unfair pressure. And so the Purpose of God can be hindered by the self-will of man. But not finally. Jesus had a great vision of the world crowding to His feet as He saw a few Greeks - strangers - earnestly seeking admission to His presence. He saw the reign of the Material at an end, and only the reign of the Spiritual remained, and He the lord of the Spiritual World (Jn.12: 31,32).

Denck's ideal of the Church of the Spirit still remains an unrealised dream. Jesus undoubtedly had in His mind a 'Communion of the Saints' as His conception of the Kingdom of God. We find some difficulty in thinking that He contemplated any such organisation as that with which practically all Christian Churches have made us in some form or other familiar. His ideal rather was expressed in the promise - "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt.18: 20). It is the more unlikely, that either Jesus or His

Apostles attempted anything of the nature of organisation, in view of their belief in the imminence of the Parousia - the nearness of Christ's return. The Catholic Church, then, could only be realised by the first and second generation of Christians as an ideal. The little groups of Christians scattered over the length and breadth of the Roman Empire were held together, by the personal devotion of their members to Christ, and their assurance that they were filled with His Spirit. The authority exercised even by Apostolic men over the various Christian communities was sparingly used. Within the Christian assemblies for worship there was the greatest freedom and spontaneity. Sometimes, as in Corinth, in the exuberance of spiritual ecstasy, as sometimes still happens in Revivals, the worshippers overstepped the bounds of religious decorum. As prophetic inspiration was recognised as an integral part of Christian worship, there must often have been much excitement. Even the ordinary members of the community were believed to be endowed with the Holy Spirit, and were led to give expression to inspired utterances for the edification of their fellow-Christians. And to even unintelligible jargon the Christian community listened with respect, and there were interpreters

of tongues who gave sense to the sometimes apparent nonsense of the ecstatic exhortation. The Apostle Paul desiderated more order in the Christian assemblies, but it was difficult to attain in that mood of spiritual exaltation which prevailed in the first and second generations of Christians. It was a time of excited expectation. The day of the Lord was at hand. The Judge was at the Door. The end of all things was approaching. The Christian communities everywhere were throbbing with eager hope. It was with them as with men on the eve of a great crisis: they lived in a world of new and strange emotions, which carried them beyond themselves. But the high level could not be maintained, and with the decline of the early enthusiasm came the need for organisation and Church order. The process was gradual. We see it emerging in the New Testament, but it was not till the beginning of the second century that the Movement began to assume significance. Organisation is of the nature of compromise. It takes the place, and endeavours to do the work initiated in a great outburst of enthusiasm. At first there is little or no organisation, and then, with the failure of the early springs of enthusiasm, the effort is made to consolidate the gains secured, in an ordered community

in which the claim is made for the continued ministry of the Spirit in Word and Sacrament. During the early period of the 'Anabaptist' reaction against orthodox Protestantism, and in the Movement for Spiritual Reform, the same phenomenon was observed. The religious communities were of the free-est order. The terms of communion were of the simplest kind. There were a few central truths which they held in common, but there was no attempt to impose them as a Creed. Among the 'Anabaptists', the second baptism was a kind of protest against what they considered the unspiritual character of the Lutheran and Zwinglian Churches, which gave admission to their membership in infancy, and before a profession of faith in the Christian redemption was possible. They fell back to a large extent on the idea of the Church invisible, and they found an expression of this in the primitive Church of the New Testament with its inspired ministry and gifts of the Holy Ghost. But as at other times, and as with other attempts to realise the Religion of the Spirit in a pure Church, they were met by failure. Under the strain of persecution, ideals and methods, from which they would have recoiled in the earlier stages of the Movement, began to dominate their minds, and in the end they

were swept away by them and perished. Had they followed the example of the orthodox Churches and formed more or less fully organised communities, they might have survived, as communities like the Waldenses, and the Baptists who emerged out of the chaos of Münster, have done. But their principles forbade this. The Church of the Spirit must be a communion of those led directly by the Spirit, and there is no room for organisation in this purely spiritual ideal. Compromise seems to be the condition of continuance in this world. Organisation, which is a real descent from inspiration, is necessary for the steady pursuit of ideals. There is no other way, evidently, for a great movement to achieve success. If with the organisation there is freedom, as there was to a quite remarkable degree in the Medieval Church, for the cultivation of the Religion of the Spirit, there is the guarantee of the outbreak of spiritual forces which will time after time lift up the Church to a higher level of spiritual life. The Reformation itself, though only partially successful, was such an outbreak, and it achieved almost as much for Religion, by the counter-Reformation to which it led in the old Church, as it did in the new. The whole of Western Christendom was shaken out of its spiritual

torpor, and an impulse was given to a more spiritual view of religion, which has not yet exhausted itself.

Within every Church there is a party of Spiritual Reform who regard the work of the Holy Spirit as the essential thing in Religion, and while the Church of to-day in many lands is apparently failing numerically, its intenser life is the compensation, and the guarantee of a spiritual revival of profound and far-reaching significance. The great need is freedom and spiritual power. It is questionable if the interests of the Religion of the Spirit would be really helped by a restatement of the Creeds of Christendom at the present time, so long as the sym- *only*  
 bolical character of these Creeds and the truths they seek to express is recognised, and they are left to be interpreted in accordance with the spiritual experience of Christian men. Even the most unexceptionable re-statement possible in the circumstances would only be the expression in symbolic language of truths that never vary, but which, while they can be experienced, can never be adequately expressed.

The teaching of history warns us not to depreciate the value of the historical Church, but to seek within the Church the widest spiritual freedom, and the loftiest spiritual life. Mere dogma and

mere rite and ceremony are subordinate, symbolic aids, but not substitutes for immediate communion with God. Even within the organised Christian community, with an enlightened understanding of the inner and essential meaning of the doctrines taught, and the sacraments administered, the Church of the Spirit can be realised, and the religion of the Spirit in large measure attained. The Spiritual Church remains invisible whether there is an organised or an unorganised community. There is no test which can be applied with inerrancy to discover the regenerate children of God. Even in communities of the Spirit there have been deplorable failures, which have proved the impossibility of establishing any certain test of true membership in the Church of Christ. Denck probably saw this in the end, and had he lived he would probably have fallen into the ranks of the more Spiritual Reformers like Oecolampadius<sup>(216)</sup> and others within the Reformed Church, and become a potent influence for Spiritual Religion, in a Church which so greatly needed it in the stern struggles of the next two centuries, in all the countries of Western Europe.

(216) For the views of Oecolampadius, see Herzog II. 99 ff. 103, 333, and Antisyngamma cf. Oecolampadius, 1526.

The spiritual ideals which Denck and others threw broadcast on the world have been of the highest possible value as a spiritual influence in the Church. These ideals lie behind the great modern Revivals. In them all, the emphasis has been laid on the ministry of the Spirit of God. It is true that the common method of describing that ministry has been crude, and has centred attention on the Divine impulse from without, conceived in a somewhat mechanical way, but the appeal to man has been made on the assumption of latent Divine power within, which is capable of answering the appeal. The attitude of all modern Revivalists is in this respect essentially that of Denck and the Reformers of the School of the Spirit. While there is the tendency in these spiritual movements to break with the organised Church, as failing to realise sufficiently in its life and order the ideals of the Spiritual Church of Christ, the conservation by the Church of a very considerable proportion of those so moved, has proved a powerful impulse towards the attainment of a loftier spiritual life. The Church is still inclined to look with suspicions on the 'enthusiast' who tends to become an extremist, but for the development of the organised Church towards a more spiritual type



of Religion, it is essential that these 'enthusiasts' should if possible be kept in the Communion of the Visible Church. They are sometimes a disturbing element, but they make for the Church's spiritual uplift by the spiritual impulse they bring, and in which there is regenerating power. Amidst the conflict of Ideals - high and low - the Church advances nearer its goal. The historical Church must find room for the Religion of the Spirit, and every spiritual energy should be conserved for the impact of the concentrated spiritual forces of the Church upon the world. In this way we may hope to make some appreciable approach to the Religion and Church of the Spirit.

Both Luther and the men of the Spiritual Reform were profoundly influenced by the Mysticism of the middle ages as expressed in the Sermons of Tauler and the 'Theologia Germanica': but in different ways. In Luther and also in Zwingli was manifested its antagonism to the externalism of the Medieval Church, and to the methods of the Scholastic Theology. Denck, on the other hand, witnessed to its emphasis on the subjective element in religion, in his doctrine of the inner word and in his antagonism to the

new Biblical orthodoxy of the Reformers which he believed meant a new scholasticism, and a retrogression to the unfreedom of subservience to the letter of Scripture. The Spiritual Reform represented by Denck was a reaction against a tendency to an abstract theology and a dead orthodoxy which were in complete opposition to the deeper principles of the Reformation. As a protest against what was really anomalous in the Reformed Church, it has had its justification in history. Denck deserves to be remembered as a distinguished leader in a great historical movement which had as its aim nothing less than the restoration of Apostolic Christianity. Luther as a Reformer took the middle way of safety. He was neither Idealist nor Radical. He was a pragmatist, and even something of an opportunist. Conservative of the past which had become sacred, and at the same time sacrificing everything he could if only he were able to take men along with him to the goal which was not yet in sight, he has arrived at last as surely as the Spiritual visionaries would have done, who tried to take the short and straight road as soon as they saw it. The principles Luther proclaimed, in spite of the fact that he so largely neutralised them by his subsequent action, have been

determining factors in the life of the world, and have made possible a genuinely spiritual reform, and a really spiritual conception of the Christian Religion within the Reformed Church. But not the less worthy of honour are men like Denck, who, because they were at least three hundred years before their time, failed to see their dreams fulfilled and their visions realised. As the necessary and logical development of Reformation principles, theirs are the ideas which are increasingly influential in the religious thought and life of the world of to-day.

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